

Before My Body is Dry

By: GirthJohnson

Determined to find her father's killer, Ryuko Matoi will fight through heaven and hell to find the answers she so desperately seeks. Her path is paved with trials and enemies, but maybe, just maybe, there's more to it than meets the eye. After all, there might be some that want her to succeed. OC story, a little AU. Edit: Thank you all so much! We broke 160,000 views!

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Transfer Student

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to my Kill la Kill fic, Before My Body is Dry!

I recently binge watched Kill la Kill on Netflix, and man oh man was it awesome. I loved it. The characters, the story, everything. So, as these things usually happen, I decided to check out the fanfics for it. And man, are there some good ones on here. I got hooked even more! So, of course I had to try my own hand at a Kill la Kill story.

This story will follow the main plot somewhat closely, through the eyes of an OC I created. There are some pretty awesome OC stories on here, so I thought I'd give it a shot.

So, read, review, and let me know what you think!

I hope you all enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

A young man stood on top of the hill, his eyes traveling down the dirt road in front of him. On either side of him stood several different types of stores, selling everything from lemons to fish. The people in the market place skittered around like ants, going from store to store with more than they started with.

He got lost in watching the crowd. Even in this godforsaken town, the people were alive, bursting with energy. Even with their backs against the wall, they kept on making a living.

It gave him hope.

Nearly forgetting why he was here, he pulled out his phone to check the time. Six A.M.

She'd be here soon.

And with her, his life would change; for better or for worse. He didn't like to think about it like that, but he had a mission to complete. A promise to keep. And he wasn't a man to back down in the face of uncertainty.

He walked down the hill, zigzagging through crowd of buyers. They paid him no mind, as they had more important things to worry about. Like making sure they could get food on the table.

The teen glanced around the stalls, spotting a ramen noodle stand at the very end of the line.

It was your typical, everyday ramen noodle stand. A banner hang from the roof of it, obscuring the face of any customer that might be sitting on one of the several stools in front of the counter.

But the best part of all? It was empty. Perfect for the young man.

The cashier manning the store was clearly lost in thought. He was cleaning a bowl with a washcloth, oblivious to the new face walking towards his stall.

"Hmm?"

The sound of stool legs being scrapped on the ground broke the cashier from his thoughts. He looked up from the bowl he was cleaning to the eyes of his new customer.

"Good morning."

"Hello, sir," The young man said as he took a seat.

The cashier stopped his work and examined him closely. You could never be too careful in the slums, after all.

He was a young man, no older than eighteen the cashier guessed. He wore a plain white shirt underneath a black zip up hoodie, and a pair of beat up blue jeans. His unkempt brown hair covered his forehead, nearly hiding his green eyes.

The cashier reasoned that he must have still been attending high school based on his age, and from one look at his outfit he could tell he must have been a No Star.

"What can I get ya?" The cashier asked, satisfied that this young man wasn't going to rob him.

"Just some ramen please," The teen said and passed the cashier some money.

The cashier counted the yen in his hand, his eyes widening at the amount.

"Young sir, this is way more than needed for a bowl of ramen."

The boy looked up at him from underneath his hair. He straightened in his seat, looking around to see if anyone was listening in.

"That, sir, is for your discretion," The teen said as he turned back to the cashier. "And a bowl of ramen."

The cashier rose an eyebrow at the pointed look the young man was giving him.

"Oh... OH, okay."

The cashier turned off the lights, then walked around to the front of the store and put up the 'Closed' sign. He walked back to behind the counter and began dipping up a bowl of ramen for the boy.

The young man took out his phone, dialing the only number on his speed dial. He held the phone up to his ear, his eyes drifting down the road that led up to the ramen stand.

" *Hello?*"

"She's here," The boy said flatly.

"... *Are you sure ?*"

He opened his mouth to answer, stopping when he saw a lone figure coming up the dirt road.

It was a young woman, no older than seventeen, with black hair that went down to her neck. He quirked an eyebrow at the red streak in her hair, but paid it no mind. She still had it, apparently.

She wore a black and white jacket, with a white shirt and red neck tie underneath. Her skirt was the same color as her hair, and rather short, only coming down to her thighs. She had what looked like a guitar case strapped over her back, but he really doubted that there was an instrument in there.

She walked with a lazy gait, her hands pushed into her jacket pockets as she strode through the town. Her face, on the other hand, was anything but. Her expression was neutral, but her eyes shone with fiery anger.

"Yep. It's Ryuko Matoi. Black hair, red streak, fiery disposition and all."

" *Alright. You know what you have to do.*"

"Understood."

He slapped the phone shut, keeping his head down as Ryuko passed by.

"Here's your ramen, sir."

"Thanks," He said and stood from his chair, slapping a few more yen on the table. "But I have to go. Why don't you have that?"

The cashier looked like he was going to protest, but the young man had already left.

"Damn kids..."

The teen hurried down the street, keeping a respectable distance away from his mark. It would complicate things if he got discovered this early.

He turned left and sprinted down a small alleyway in-between the beat up buildings. That was one of the things the boy loved about the slums. If you knew your way around, you could traverse it in a matter of minutes instead of nearly an hour.

He quickened his pace, jumping or ducking over the occasional pipe in his way. He had to make sure he got out ahead of her, otherwise his plan wouldn't work.

Taking a right, and another right, he reemerged on the main street and what he guessed was five minutes in front of Ryuko if she kept walking at the same speed.

He stopped to catch his breath, going over the plan in his head.

"Okay, okay..." The young man mumbled and looked around. He knew this day was coming for a few weeks now, and he already had a decent idea on how to go about this. He just had to find a certain pickpocket...

His eyes traveled a little further up the road, spotting a small boy with an interesting hair cut and a pair of sunglasses resting on the top of his head.

That's him.

"Mataro!"

The boy stopped walking and turned around, raising an eyebrow at the older teen.

"Do I know you?" Mataro tilted his head at the teen. He pursed his lips, snapping his fingers as realization washed over his face. "Oh, you're Sis's friend, right? Taka..."

"Takahiro," He finished for him. "Akio Takahiro."

"Yeah," Mataro crossed his arms and looked Akio up and down. "So whatchu want?"

"In a few minutes, a girl with black hair with a red streak through it is going to come walking up those stairs," Akio explained and pointed to the stairwell behind him. "I want you to pickpocket something from her."

Mataro rose an eyebrow "Like what?"

"Anything, it doesn't matter."

"And why would I help you?" Mataro narrowed his eyes.

"Because," Akio began and pulled a magazine from his coat. "I'll give you this."

Mataro's eyes sparkled looking at the fabled cover of a Playboy magazine. It was everything he had hoped it would be, and then some. It was as if all other light on the street lessened out, leaving only the magazine glowing in its heavenly light. It was like the light at the end of the tunnel...

"I-it can't be..." Makaro stammered. He shook his head, snapping out of his stupor. "I admit, you've got me interested. But why wouldn't me and my boys just jump you for it?"

Mataro cackled and stepped forwards cracking his knuckles.

"I don't have time for this," Akio grumbled and pulled out a lighter from his pocket. "If you move another inch I'll burn it."

"Whoa, whoa!" Mataro rose his hands and took a few steps back. "Let's not get hasty now..."

"Do we have a deal?"

"Yeah, we got a deal."

"Good," Akio said and threw the magazine at him. "Get ready. She'll be here soon."

Akio walked into another alleyway, stopping to turn his head back to Mako's brother one final time.

"There'll be more where that came from if you keep your mouth shut about this. Are we clear?"

Mataro gave a toothy grin, giving Akio a thumbs up.

"You betcha!"

Akio nodded and entered the alleyway, ducking out of sight of the road.

Taking a running start, he scaled the side of a building, using various ledges and window sills to climb to the top. The roofs always had the best vantage point, as well as the best hiding spots. You'd be surprised at how many people never think to look up.

Akio glanced around, slightly amazed by how high up he actually was. He could nearly see the slums in its entirety. The roofs of hundreds of buildings filled his sight, with the occasional glow from a random neon sign catching his eye.

The slums might have been a dirty, bug-ridden hellhole for a lot of people, but not to Akio.

To him, the slums was one big family. They had more community than the rest of Honnou City put together. And while the people down here may have been shifty, they had more heart in them than any

student at Honnouji Academy. Satsuki and her Elite Four couldn't hold a candle to the spirit of these people.

In a way, he admired them. They had a lot of spunk and tenacity. Akio respected that.

Satisfied that he wouldn't be seen up this high, Akio leaned over the roof's gutter to watch the scene down below.

As predicted, it seemed that Ryuko was surrounded by Mataro and his 'boys.' It didn't seem that Ryuko was that fazed, even with the four boys closing in around her.

At Mataro's signal, three of his goons jumped Ryuko, only to be slapped away quicker than Akio could even follow.

The four boys, in apparent awe of Ryuko's skill, got down on their hands and knees and begged for forgiveness.

Akio frowned slightly and looked around. Mako should have been here by now.

Mako was the glue that held his plan together. He needed her to meet Ryuko before class started, so the two could get acquainted with each other. It didn't matter if they had the same homeroom, if one or two things went astray they may not even become friends, and that would simply not do.

The Mankanshoku's, while a little eccentric, were amazingly kind people. Akio had been over to their house a few times for dinner over the past few weeks, and he could just tell from meeting them that were kind-hearted individuals. It would be the perfect place for Ryuko to stay.

Mako, being the nice girl she was, would probably invite Ryuko to stay there by day's end. Maybe not immediately, but it would definitely happen if he played his cards right. Akio had done his research, and he wasn't planning on being wrong.

He turned his attention back to the five below him, right when Ryuko began walking away.

"Damn it," Akio cursed under his breath. He could have sworn that would have worked.

Just when he had thought all hope was lost, a book bag came flying in out of nowhere, smacking Mataro in the back of the head and knocking him to the ground.

Before the poor boy could hope to stand, Mako came flying in, tackling him back to the ground.

Akio exhaled slowly. "Thank you, Mako."

Akio stepped away from the ledge, pulling out his cell phone and hitting the speed dial.

" *Akio?* "

"Yep. It's been taken care of."

" *Good. Good. Well done.* "

"Thanks."

" *Class will be starting soon. You should probably get going before you're late.* "

"Will do. Later."

Akio hung up the phone, placing it back in his pocket.

Just to make sure his plan had bore fruits, Akio took one last look over the ledge.

Mako was running off to catch the school tram, leaving Ryuko standing there stupefied. She recovered from her trance and glanced around, then began her trek towards the Academy at her usual pace.

Akio sighed in relief. It all worked out in the end.

Ryuko stopped abruptly, her back stiffening.

Akio barely had time to curse as he dropped to his stomach, avoiding Ryuko's gaze when she turned to look behind her.

"That... was close."

That would have been hard to explain if she saw him standing on a roof, staring at her. He most certainly didn't want to be branded as a pervert.

Besides, it would have been rather awkward when she saw him in class later.

Mr. Mikisugi stood at the chalkboard, the chalk in his hands smacking against its surface as he wrote.

"This is Ryuko Matoi, who has transferred into Second Year Class K this year."

Ryuko stood in front of the class, her hands in her pockets as she accepted the curious stares of the entire class.

Akio leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms. He glanced to the open seat in-between him and Mako. That had been a nice coincidence.

Mako woke up from her sleep, sitting straight up in her seat and waving enthusiastically at Ryuko.

"Ryuko! Ryuko!"

"Hmm?" Ryuko rose an inquisitive eyebrow, shifting her gaze to Mako.

"Over here! Over here!" Mako practically yelled and pointed to the free desk next to her. "This desk is free!"

Mako continued on her rant about the student that used to sit there, while Ryuko and Mikisugi exchanged a few words.

Akio placed his chin in his hands, drowning out their conversation. He hoped he was appearing aloof. He was a decent enough actor, thankfully.

"Hey."

Akio twisted his chin in his hand, turning to face his new neighbor.

"Yes?"

Ryuko stared intently at him, her eyebrows narrowing slightly.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Akio bit back the urge to flinch. Did she see him spying on her?

"No."

Ryuko didn't look entirely convinced, but Mr. Mikisugi chose that opportunity to continue his lecture on Nazi Germany.

Ryuko twisted in her seat, going back to facing Mako.

Akio exhaled in relief, giving his teacher a mental 'thank you.'

With class over for the day, the students fled the school building like a flock of startled birds.

That's one thing all schools had in common; the students couldn't wait to leave it.

Akio followed Mako and Ryuko out of the school building, keeping his distance. He wasn't entirely sure what to do next, since he already completed the first task he had set out for. He could go back to that ramen stand, and actually eat this time. Or just head back to his apartment.

The crowd of students began to quiet down, their voices dropping to nothing but a whisper.

Akio's eyes narrowed.

The herd of students gathered in the center of the school courtyard, all lowering down in a bow.

Everyone except Ryuko that is. Of course.

Akio cursed under his breath. She'd stick out like a sore thumb among all of the students in their school uniforms. He couldn't have that.

"Get down," Akio hissed in her ear and pushed her head down.

"Wha?" Ryuko eyes widened, narrowing once she saw that the hand was attached to Akio. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Akio's right, Ryuko!" Mako whispered, but it came out as more of a yell. "Bow! Bow!"

Ryuko grumbled and lowered to her knees, but didn't exactly bow.

A giant of a man walked towards them, his Three Star Goku uniform accentuated with sharp spikes on his shoulders and his giant, steel gauntlets.

He towered above his fellow students, his short blonde hair blowing in the wind.

"Is he a big shot?" Ryuko asked, unimpressed.

Akio stayed quiet, content to let Mako answer.

"Yeah! He's a three star!"

"A three star?"

Akio rolled his eyes, drowning out their conversation. He didn't need another explanation on how the Goku uniforms worked. He wasn't exactly pleased that he had to jump in like this either.

He decided to watch Ira Gamagoori walk down the isle of students, his posture straight and proud. Akio couldn't help but think Gamagoori would have made an excellent drill sergeant. The Disciplinary Committee's leader sure had the body for it. And the attitude.

"... That's Lady Satsuki there!"

Akio perked his head up, paying more attention at Mako's mention of the student class president. Slowly, he turned his head towards the stairs that Gamagoori came from, and sure enough, there was Satsuki Kiryuin herself.

Akio glanced beside him to make sure Ryuko was still there, but of course, she wasn't.

"Shit."

He should have seen that one coming.

"So, I hear you're the queen bee in this school," Ryuko began as she slid in front of the path Satsuki was taking. "I have a question for you."

Satsuki remained expressionless, only watching as Ryuko addressed her.

Akio pinched the bridge of his nose. "Stupid, stupid girl..."

"BITCH!" Roared the group of One Stars in front of her. "HOW DARE YOU!"

They all dove towards Ryuko to tackle her to the ground and retain her, but she was quicker.

Using only the case she carried on her back, she smacked them away.

With those fools taken care of, she cracked open the case, pulling out a red sword with a loop at the end of its hilt. She swung it above her head and twirled it around her body elegantly before grasping it and pointing it at Satsuki.

The president's eyes widened slightly at the sight of it.

"A scissor?"

"A half scissor?"

The crowd murmured in astonishment, all gaping at Ryuko's sword.

"It's a huge scissor!" Mako exclaimed.

"That's right. This is half of a giant pair of scissors," Ryuko confirmed, her eyes still locked on to Satsuki's. "I'm looking for the owner of the other half. And based on the shocked expression on your face, I take it you know where it is. You've seen it, haven't you!?"

Satsuki tilted her head back slightly, her hands resting on the hilt of her sword.

"And if I have?"

Ryuko's eyes widened momentarily before her expression darkened.

"YOU'RE THE WOMAN WITH THE SCISSOR BLADE, AREN'T YOU!"

"Matoi!" Akio cried out, but it was too late. She was already gone.

Ryuko flew up the stairs, her scissor blade cocked back and ready to strike.

"TEK!"

Akio flinched. He knew that nasally voice anywhere

A giant, red fist barreled into Ryuko, stopping her in her tracks and sending her back.

"KEN!"

"FUN!"

"SAI!"

The boxing club president punctuated each of his shouts with a brutal punch to Ryuko's body, ending up with her getting thrown into the crowd of students, knocking them out of the way like a bowling ball does the pins.

"Fukuroda," Akio growled. This would definitely make things difficult.

"Boxing Club President Takaharu Fukuroda," The boxing president announced and turned back to Lady Satsuki. "Permit me to finish off this insolent wench!"

Satsuki closed her eyes and nodded. "She is yours."

Akio fidgeted in place, grinding his teeth. Ryuko was really not making this easy for him.

"Stand aside you bastards!"

Ryuko pushed through the crowd of students, charging the boxing club president directly.

Her blade clashed against Fukuroda's boxing glove, resulting in a loud clanging sound.

"W-what?" Ryuko gasped. "That glove is made of iron!?"

Fukuroda smirked and raised his fists. "Don't you even know your uniforms?"

Fukuroda preceded to go into a rant about the strength of his Two Star Goku Uniform, but Akio drowned it out. He had to think of what to do.

With Ryuko the way she was now, there was no way she could win against a Two Star uniform. He could intervene, stopping the fight. But of course, Ryuko would know something was up then, as well as Satsuki. This was a dog-eat-dog world, and if he openly stood up for a transfer student, they would immediately know something was up. He could handle Ryuko being suspicious of him, but Satsuki was another story.

He could let her get pummeled into the ground, but that would mean he would have to fail, and he wasn't exactly planning on doing that. He had promised he would protect Ryuko's life, even at the cost of his own if necessary. If she got flattened here, their plans were ruined.

"I don't really follow you, but if they're made of iron, I guess I don't need to pull my punches."

Akio snapped his head back to the fight, cursing himself for losing attention.

"Pull your punches!? Don't you dare slight me!"

A stream of mini boxing gloves erupted from Fukuroda's glove, smacking into Ryuko and throwing her about violently.

Fukuroda finished his barrage by bolting towards Ryuko, uppercutting her in the waist and sending her flying into the air.

Ryuko flew several feet into the air, then smashed back into the ground, blood gushing from her mouth and arm.

She was done.

Satsuki frowned at the downed form of Ryuko, her brow wrinkling in distaste.

"I thought you might prove slightly amusing. But you're just a fool who doesn't know how to wield that scissor properly. How dull."

Satsuki turned her back on the scene and walked away.

"Not so fast!" Ryuko struggled to a sitting position. "You do know something, don't you?"

Akio saw Fukuroda tense his body, preparing to deliver the finishing blow.

Fukuroda placed his giant gloves on the ground, using them to prop himself up for a brutal drop kick towards Ryuko's face.

"Mind your tongue!"

"That's enough!"

Akio placed himself in front of Ryuko, grabbing Fukuroda's feet and preventing him from connecting with Ryuko.

The crowd stared dumbly at Akio, murmurs of surprise rippling throughout the sea of students. It wasn't everyday that a No Star would stand up against Lady Satsuki and her subordinates.

"Huh?"

Akio twisted his arms, sending Fukuroda into a barrel roll and into the ground with a satisfying thud.

"Takahiro!"

Fukuroda picked himself up from the cement, growling menacingly at the No Star.

"What is the meaning of this!?"

"Yes, Takahiro," Satsuki turned back towards them. "Just what *is* the meaning of this?"

"Lady Satsuki," Akio bowed. "I believe we should give Matoi the benefit of the doubt, and drop this."

"Excuse me?" Fukuroda took a step towards Akio, rubbing the ends of his gloves together. "She insults the Lady's presence by just standing here!"

"Why should we do that, Takahiro?" Satsuki's authoritative voice rang out through the courtyard.

"She's a transfer student, after all. She doesn't even know how this school works, let alone who you are, my Lady. Why, she didn't even know you existed until five minutes ago. We're Honnouji Academy, the greatest school in the nation. It would sully our appearance if we mercilessly punished a student on her first day here."

"Hey!" Ryuko glared at Akio's back, struggling to her feet. "I don't need you fighting my battles for me, shit-brains."

Akio turned his head towards Ryuko, his eyes boring holes in to her's.

"Shut. Up."

Ryuko growled but didn't say anything more.

"Can it, Takahiro," Fukuroda stepped forwards. "You've made a mistake-"

"You make valid point, Takahiro," Satsuki said. "Fine. But I will be confiscating that scissor blade."

"No!"

Ryuko stepped forwards shakily, leaning heavily against her scissor blade.

"This is the one thing I will *never* hand over. Never!"

Ryuko stumbled forwards, striking out with her blade blindly.

Akio reached up, snatching the blade out of the air with the palm of his hand.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?" Akio hissed, ignoring his now bleeding hand. "I just gave you another chance, get the hell out of here!"

"Don't you dare tell me what to do," Ryuko growled. "I'll beat the-"

"Do you want to lose that scissor blade of yours?"

"..."

Ryuko's eyes softened slightly and she reluctantly shook her head.

"That's what I thought," Akio said and flung the sword back towards her. "Then get the hell out of here."

Ryuko backed away slowly, eventually turning around and running full speed towards the entrance of the Academy.

Akio exhaled in relief, then turned back towards the class president and her lackey.

Satsuki narrowed her eyes at the No Star.

"Why such interest in a transfer student, Takahiro?"

"She's a classmate," Akio replied with as blank of an expression as he could muster. "It'd be rude of me not to help out my fellow classmate, especially one so new."

Satsuki's hard eyes searched his, but Akio remained stoic, not budging an inch.

"Fair enough," Satsuki replied and turned her back to the crowd, walking away.

Akio let out the breath he didn't know he was holding, feeling his whole body unclench.

"This isn't over, No Star," Fukuroda pointed a glove at Akio. "You'll regret getting in my way."

Akio frowned at the boxing president. He really, *really*, did not like this man.

"Why don't you go follow your mother duck, duckling. Wouldn't want to get lost now, would we?"

Fukuroda growled at Akio and spun around, letting his Goku uniform's cloak billow in the wind.

"Thanks for the save, Akio!"

Mako sprinted out of the crowd, giving Akio several pats on the head like a dog.

"It's my pleasure, Mako," Akio smiled softly and removed the hand from his head.

"Hey! I know!" Mako placed a finger on her chin, her whole face lighting up. "Why don't you come over for dinner tonight! As a thank

you!"

"While that does sound like fun, I can't," Akio smiled apologetically. "I have some work I have to do."

"That's okay!" Mako replied bright as ever. "Maybe another time then!"

"Of course," Akio nodded and turned around, walking away from Mako. "Another time."

Once he was a respectable distance away from the crowd of students leaving the school, Akio pulled out his cell phone, hitting the speed dial.

" *That was a very, very dumb thing you did Akio,*" The voice said immediately upon connecting.

"I know. But it was necessary."

" *It may have been, but you also just made yourself look incredibly suspicious. They will be watching you now, you know.*"

"That's my problem, not yours or Matoi's. I'll work it out."

"... *Fine,*" The voice admitted begrudgingly. " *I just worry sometimes, that's all.*"

"I know," Akio smiled. "Thank you, Aikuro. It's nice to know someone is looking out for me in this godforsaken place."

" *Yes, well,*" Aikuro mumbled sheepishly. " *What is it you need?*"

Akio glanced around, making sure no one was in hearing distance.

"Matoi is heading towards the mansion."

" *What? How could you possibly know that?* "

"I have a feeling," Akio said. "You heard her talk about that scissor blade. Her father is fresh on her mind."

" *Hmmm,*" Aikuro hummed, giving Akio's words consideration. "*Good point. Alright, I'll head out there. Stay safe.*"

"You too," Akio replied and snapped his phone shut.

He sighed, continuing his walk out of the Academy.

This was going to be a lot harder than he thought.

But he had to give it to her. She had spunk.

Author's Notes:

So there you have it! As you can see, my character will not be a Kamui wearer. And as you can see, he has some orders to keep watch on Ryuko, as she is a valuable asset. But, how well will that work out? We all know our little Ryuko is a wild card. Can he really contain her? I guess we'll see!

Welp, I hope you all liked it! I look forward to writing this, I think it'll be a lot of fun.

Until next time!

A Girl and Her Sailor Uniform

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the second chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Thanks for all of the reviews, follows, and favorites so far guys! I really appreciate it :).

This chapter will be a lot more juicy than the first one. There'll be some action, some character interactions, and even some information revealed about Akio.

So sit back, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Akio leaned back on the couch, letting himself drift off into its comfort. It had been a LONG day.

He reached over to the nearby coffee table, grabbing the book off its surface and opening it to the page he was on last.

Well, it wasn't really a coffee table. It was more like a pile of newspapers holding up a wood plank. The couch he was sitting on was held up by books and newspapers too. Most of the stuff in his shared tiny apartment was broken down and jury-rigged, but hey, Akio was a simple man. As long as it worked, he could care less.

Content to get lost in the story, Akio sighed happily, finally allowing himself to relax.

No sooner than he had opened the book did Aikuro Mikisugi walk in, his posture slouching and wearing his usual teacher persona.

Aikuro glanced at the cover of Akio's book, stifling a chuckle.

"A Farewell to Arms huh? Still haven't finished that book?"

"I like to take my time when I read," Akio scowled. "Sue me."

Aikuro let out the laugh he was holding in and sat down beside him, kicking his feet up on their coffee table.

"We finished that book weeks ago in class. Even Mankanshoku finished it before you."

Akio grunted, ignoring Aikuro's remark.

The two sat in silence for a bit, basking in their relaxation. Aikuro rose from the couch, walking over to their mini fridge and pulling out a beer.

"You want one?" Aikuro asked and raised the can in his hand.

"I'm good for now."

Aikuro nodded and walked back to the couch, plopping down and opening the can. He took a sip of the cool drink, letting out a long sigh of satisfaction.

Akio set the book down and looked at his roommate.

"So? How'd it go?"

Aikuro ran a hand through his hair, taking his glasses off in the process and dropping his fake persona.

"All according to plan."

"She found the Kamui?"

"Indeed," Aikuro affirmed as his shirt began to slip off his shoulders.

"Good. Maybe now I won't have to jump in to save her sorry ass."

"That is, if it doesn't take control of her," Aikuro remarked and sipped his beverage.

Akio's eyes darkened and he turned away.

"Yeah... there is that."

The garbling sound of static from the intercoms interrupted their conversation.

"Transfer student!"

Fukuroda's voice echoed throughout the town, even reaching Akio and Aikuro in their home.

"One hour from now, your best friend's execution will be carried out, as shared responsibility for your crime of treason against Honnouji Academy!" Fukuroda continued.

The color from Akio's face drained. They had lied to him.

"If you want to stop it, quit skulking and show yourself!"

With that, the intercoms quieted back down, returning to silence.

Akio ground his teeth, barely controlling his anger.

"Those bastards," He growled and slammed a fist on the table. "They told me they'd let it go. They told me they'd let it slide!"

"It appears not," Aikuro commented, glancing at Akio from the corner of his eye while he sipped his beer. "What're you going to do?"

Akio shot up from the couch, walking over to their dresser cabinet and opening one of the shelves.

Aikuro recognized what he was doing and stood up to stop him, his shirt now on the ground.

"You can't go out there."

"Yeah?"

Akio pulled out a roll of boxing tape from the cabinet and unraveled it, wrapping the white tape around his hands.

"Well, I'm gonna."

"You'll only be exposing yourself more and more. And even if you stop that Two Star, who's to say that the one of the Three Stars won't step in?"

"We'll cross that road when we come to it," Akio replied absentmindedly as he put on his sneakers. "This is my fault she's out there, Aikuro. If I did my job better, then this whole thing wouldn't have happened. If something happens to her because of me, I'll never be able to live with myself."

"This isn't your fault, Akio. And who's to say that Ryuko won't make it in time?"

"Well, I sure didn't help it," Akio said and walked to the door. "And I can't put my trust in Matoi. She's still a wild card at this point."

"Fine," Aikuro sighed and put back on his glasses. "I'm at least coming with you. I might be able to convince the principal to stop it."

"Like that'll work," Akio scoffed. "They're Kiryuin's slaves."

"I know," Aikuro replied and put back on his shirt. "But it couldn't hurt to try."

"Alright," Akio nodded and turned back to Aikuro. "Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. You better get going though. You only have an hour."

Akio nodded again and walked out the door, tightening the tape that covered his hands.

He'd be damned if they laid a single finger on Mako's head.

Akio pulled his hood up on his jacket and walked into Honnouji Academy's courtyard.

He had made it here quick. At least ten minutes within Fukuroda releasing that announcement.

In the center of the courtyard was boxing ring, where Fukuroda and the athletics' chair Uzu Sanageyama stood at the center of it. A large crowd had gathered, watching as the two stood there doing nothing. Behind the two a giant cross stood, with Mako tied upside down in the center of it. She was throwing a fit, desperately fighting against gravity to keep her clothes from falling down. A fight she was losing, if her predominant blush and bare midriff were any indication.

Poor Mako. What a bad day to not wear a bra...

Akio pushed his way through the crowd, keeping his head low and underneath its hood. He had no idea if he could expect Ryuko's help on this. She had found the Kamui Dr. Matoi had made, but there was no way of knowing if she was able to control it.

And he wasn't going to take any chance in Mako getting harmed. Knowing this school, they were probably planning on dumping her in a vat of boiling oil, or something.

He continued walking forward, eventually making it to the edge of the crowd.

"Fukuroda!"

The crowd murmured in surprise, looking around to see who made the noise.

Akio stepped forwards, pulling his hood down.

"Akio!" Mako squealed, squirming underneath her bindings. "I knew someone would come! I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!"

"Don't worry, Mako," Akio reassured with a confident grin. "I'll get you down."

"Well, well, if it isn't Takahiro," The boxing president smirked and crossed his arms. "I was hoping the transfer student would show, but this works. We still have a score to settle."

"Taking a hostage is cowardly," Akio glared at the boxer, his nostrils flared. "Especially Mankanshoku. Even after you said you'd drop this. I do not care for liars, Fukuroda. You'll pay for this."

"Oh? Will I?" Fukuroda sneered. "Big words for a No Star."

Akio ignored his insult, and climbed into the ring. He unzipped his jacket, letting it fall from his shoulders to reveal his lithe, well-toned upper body. The body of a fighter.

Half of the crowd behind him blushed at his half naked body, but to be fair, they blushed at everything.

Akio raised his taped-up fists, falling into his fighting stance.

"I'll let you handle this one," Uzu stated and stepped out of the ring. "Like you said, if you fail again your uniform is confiscated."

"Fine," Fukuroda huffed and raised his gloves at Akio. "This will be fun, won't it? The current boxing club president versus the former one."

"It's not the clothes that make the man," Akio replied and raised his hand, beckoning for Fukuroda to attack him. "Which is why I quit."

"Why you!"

Fukuroda roared in anger and charged at Akio, his fist raised and ready to strike.

Akio allowed him to get close, then at the last second he slid to the right, dodging his giant glove.

"Huh?"

Before Fukuroda could recover, Akio latched onto his arm. Using Fukuroda's forward progress, he lifted him over his back shoulder, throwing him into the ground.

Fukuroda growled and picked himself off the stage, going in for a vicious uppercut.

Akio jumped away, narrowly dodging it.

"Hmph," Akio huffed and bounced on the balls of his feet. "You look good on the ground."

"Grr!"

Fukuroda snarled at Akio and charged him directly again.

Expecting him to pull the same stunt, Fukuroda feinted to the left, then lashed out to the right, expecting to hit Akio as he tried to dodge.

Instead, Akio ducked and kicked out with his leg, connecting with Fukuroda's and sending him tumbling head over heel back to the ground.

"Damn you!" Fukuroda slammed his fist on the ground and stood back up. "Stop mocking me and fight!"

"Do not insult my intelligence," Akio scoffed. "I am no fool. Even if you are a terrible boxer, that Goku uniform enhances all of your

abilities way beyond what I could hope to deal with."

Akio's eyes darted to the right, catching the billowing of a black cloak in his peripherals.

"Besides," Akio said and lowered his hands. "It looks like I bought enough time."

Fukuroda tilted his head to the side. "Huh?"

As soon as he had said it, the cloaked figure jumped into the air, using the heads of the students as stepping stones to reach the stage.

The figure flew through air, throwing back her cloak to reveal a red scissor blade underneath.

Ryuko collided with the cross, destroying each of the metal shackles that held Mako in place.

"Ryuko!"

Ryuko moved to the last shackle, her blade hovering over it. "Hold on tight!"

She smashed it right as Fukuroda's goons dove towards her. She was able to dodge the goons, but in the process lost her gripping on Mako.

"Mako!"

Mako fell towards the ground, her eyes clenched shut as she let out an ear splitting shriek. It was only a ten foot drop, but still.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAA- huh?"

Mako peeked one eye open when she realized she had stopped falling, seeing the face of Akio's looming over her.

"Oh, hey! You caught me!" Mako reached up and patted Akio's head like a dog, which she seemed so fond of doing as of late. "Thanks a ton, Akio!"

Akio chuckled and removed her hand, then slowly placed her back down on the ground.

"Think nothing of it."

Akio glanced to his left, seeing Ryuko glaring daggers at him. Her eyes softened slightly when they met his and she dipped her head in gratitude.

"Alright, Mako," Akio placed a hand on her shoulder and steered her to the side of the stage. "Let's get out of their way."

Mako nodded enthusiastically and followed Akio off the stage, stopping to pick up his jacket and hand it to him.

"Don't forget this!" Mako said and adopted a stern expression. "You don't want to catch a cold!"

Akio grinned, accepting his jacket from her.

"Thank you."

The two stepped out of the ring, joining the rest of the onlookers as Ryuko and Fukuroda began to duke it out.

Akio watched intently, his eyes never leaving Ryuko. He assumed that she was wearing the Kamui underneath her black cloak, but he really had no way of knowing. Especially since she wasn't taking the offensive.

Fukuroda pummeled her with his barrage of boxing glove shaped projectiles, but Ryuko didn't move an inch.

Akio crossed his arms, his eyes narrowing slightly in thought.

What game is she playing?

Fukuroda seemed to have the same thought process. Clearly getting agitated by Ryuko not budging an inch, he charged her with his right fist forward, his glove turning into a drill.

His fist connected with Ryuko's midsection, but nothing happened.

The black cloak she was wearing was torn to shreds, revealing that Ryuko's scissor blade had blocked Fukuroda's hit.

Akio quirked in eyebrow, a slight smirk forming on his face.

That wasn't the only thing revealed; not by a long shot.

With the cloak gone, Ryuko's true outfit was unveiled. From what Akio could gather, she was in fact wearing the Kamui. But it was a lot... skimpier than he originally imagined. Ryuko's chest and shoulders were covered, albeit barely, with straps connecting them to her rather revealing undergarments. She had a skirt on, but it didn't really cover much. Nearly her entire backside was visible for all to see, and the stockings she was wearing only added to its risqué look.

No wonder she was blushing.

Everyone in the crowd gasped, followed by several large nosebleeds and furious blushes. Even Fukuroda was affected by Ryuko's revealing outfit.

"What sort of outfit is that!?" Fukuroda exclaimed.

"Quit gawking!" Ryuko shouted, trying to keep a brave face. Her own blush didn't really help.

"Y-you're trying to distract me with its sexiness!"

Akio suppressed a snicker. The boxing president was certainly caught off guard.

"I'm not wearing this because I want to!"

Credit where credit was due, Ryuko was doing a good job at not letting this faze her.

"How dare you! You're mocking boxing- no, all sports!"

"I am not!"

"Alright then," Fukuroda said and stepped away, his hands moving to his waist band. "I'll take the liberty of undressing too."

Akio's eyes widened.

"Matoi! Be careful!"

"Huh?" Ryuko rose an eyebrow and looked to Akio. "Well, of course I'm going to be careful. I don't want this pervert getting anywhere near me."

"You should listen to the No Star, transfer student," Fukuroda said and revealed his real boxing gloves. "It's time to take off the soft gloves I've been wearing for away bouts."

Fukuroda revealed his real boxing gloves, which happened to be squares of iron with jagged edges at the tip.

"What!?"

"Behold!"

Fukuroda pulled another chain, revealing several other razor sharp spikes along the sides of his gloves.

"If I didn't wrap them, students from other schools would be too afraid to fight me! But having them out for all to see like this fills me with even more strength!"

"This. Is. A. Goku Uniform!"

Akio sighed and rolled his eyes. Fukuroda always had a touch for dramatics.

Ryuko tilted her head and drooped her shoulders.

"Even someone like me who doesn't know the rules can see that that's illegal," Ryuko tilted her head back down, her expression turned competitive. "But still, you're on."

Fukuroda barreled towards Ryuko once more, determined to power through her with brute force alone.

Ryuko didn't move an inch, allowing the boxing president's corkscrew to connect to her chest.

And then, silence. It was like a Mexican standoff. No one budged an inch. The crowd watched in anticipation, scarcely letting out a breath. They had no quarrels with gawking at Ryuko's form, however.

In the blink of an eye, Fukuroda's iron glove shattered. It appeared that Ryuko's outfit was a lot sturdier than Fukuroda's gloves.

"W-what!?"

"Your glove isn't the only thing that turns into steel! So does my outfit!"

"Impossible! Impossible, impossible!"

Fukuroda became a whirlwind of punches, hitting at every part of Ryuko's body. Ryuko still refused to budge.

Akio couldn't help but be somewhat astounded by the strength and endurance of the girl.

So this is the power of a Kamui...

"Oh, wow!" Mako exclaimed, throwing out punches into the air. "I didn't know you also knew how to box, Ryuko!"

Mataro appeared out of nowhere, scooting up to the edge of the boxing ring so that he was directly beneath Ryuko.

"I don't think she does. But man, is this view awesome! Totally awesome!"

Mataro turned away from the fight and wiggled his eyebrows at Akio.

"Isn't that right, Akio?"

Akio ignored Mataro's cheeky comment, keeping his eyes glued on the fight.

Getting fed up with Fukuroda and the crowd of gawkers, Ryuko finally went on the offensive.

She hopped through the ring, narrowly avoiding Fukuroda's barrage of fists.

Ryuko flipped the scissor in her hand, grabbing it by the blade.

"Left jab!"

Ryuko swung the hilt towards Fukuroda's head, connecting with his helmet and denting it.

"Right hook!"

Ryuko twirled the scissor by its handle, bringing it down and smacking Fukuroda's ribs with the flat side of the blade.

"And then an uppercut!"

Ryuko flipped the scissor once more, grabbing it by the blade and thrust it upwards, the hilt connecting with Fukuroda's chin.

Fukuroda flew into the air, hitting the ground with a thud and bounced, blood and teeth spraying every which way.

"And then a right straight to finish you off!"

Ryuko dashed forwards, her blade trailing behind her. Her blade slammed into Fukuroda while he was still suspended in the air, sending his Goku uniform into shreds and Fukuroda flipping through the air.

The scraps of the uniform disintegrated into the air, revealing a single red string. The string floated through the air towards Ryuko, getting sucked up into the back of her outfit.

"Now to finish you off!"

Ryuko spun around and flew towards the downed man, smacking her scissor into his chest and flinging him towards the giant tower of Honnouji Academy, where Satsuki Kiryuin was standing watching the events transpire.

A wall of One Stars stood in the way of the oncoming projectile. Fukuroda's body hit the students, erupting in a spray of blood.

The Elite Four interjected themselves between the spurt of blood and Satsuki, but a stray droplet still connected with the Lady's cheek.

Satsuki wiped the blood away with her thumb, her eyes never leaving Ryuko.

Uzu gaped at the scene, his astonishment quickly dissolving into pure anger. He hopped into the ring, prepared to give Ryuko a piece of his mind.

"Enough."

Satsuki's voice echoed throughout the plaza, stopping everyone in their tracks.

"You there," Satsuki began, addressing Ryuko. "Where did you get your hands on that outfit?"

Ryuko stomped on the ground, the microphone beneath her feet flying into her hands.

"Wait!" Akio hissed, hoping his voice would only reach Ryuko. "Don't-"

"This is a keepsake from my father."

Satsuki narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"And this scissor blade was left behind by the person that killed him," Ryuko continued. "Now you're going to tell me... who this scissor blade belongs to... Satsuki Kiryuin!"

Akio sighed and rubbed the backs of his eyelids.

It's always, *always*, beneficial to divulge as much important information as you could to your mortal enemy.

"She really has no tact," Akio grumbled beneath his breath.

Ryuko stopped completely and seemed to be having a conversation with herself. Apparently coming to a decision, she dropped the microphone on the ground and walked off the stage towards Akio and Mako.

Akio rose an eyebrow. That was... strange to say the least. He at least thought she'd stick around to hear Satsuki's answer.

"Wow, Ryuko!" Mako squealed once Ryuko was within hearing range. "That was amazing! And who knew you could fight so well with such a revealing uniform!"

Ryuko's blush deepened, her eyes darting towards Akio then back to Mako.

Her rebuttal was interrupted when Satsuki's voice rang out through the courtyard once more.

"You said your name was Ryuko Matoi? You're Isshin Matoi's daughter?"

Ryuko turned back towards Satsuki, her eyes screaming bloody murder. Akio frowned slightly, noticing for the first time that Ryuko's legs were shaking and that she was sweating all over. Her face was still flushed, but it looked more like it was from overexertion than embarrassment.

"So, you do know who my father is!?" Ryuko shouted and lifted her scissor at Satsuki. A blast of steam emitted from Ryuko's chest piece, and in response she fell to her knees, only able to keep herself from collapsing out right by propping herself up with her scissor.

"Shit," Akio breathed and turned up to the Academy, looking for Aikuro's homeroom. He met Aikuro's eyes and he gave him a soft nod, which Akio responded in turn to. It was time to get out of here.

Akio stepped towards Ryuko, grabbing her arm and looping it around his shoulders.

"Alright, enough small talk. It's time to leave."

"W-what?" Ryuko stammered, her half lidded eyes glaring daggers at Akio.

She tried to push herself away from Akio, but she was too weak. Instead, it was just a soft shove against his shoulder.

"You must be famished, *right* ?" Akio asked. "After all, you haven't eaten all day."

Ryuko had an internal debate with herself before she nodded slowly.

"... Fine," Ryuko replied reluctantly, turning her head back to Satsuki. "We'll have a leisurely chat another day, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

"Yeah, yeah, there'll be enough time for chit-chat later," Akio muttered and began leading Ryuko to the entrance to the Academy. "Come on, Mako!"

Mako flinched as if she had just been woken up from a deep sleep.

"Eep! R-right!"

The three made their way towards the entrance, not making great time since Akio had to essentially carry all of Ryuko's weight.

"Don't let her escape!" Uzu cried out. "After them, after them!"

CLANG!

The crowd of students stopped in their tracks, including Akio, and looked up to the sound, which happened to be Satsuki slamming the sheathe of her sword into the ground.

"Don't bother."

"B-but, my Lady!" Uzu protested.

"She'll be back. Leave her be until then."

Satsuki turned around and walked away from the ledge of the tower, her hair billowing in the wind.

"Good enough for me," Akio mumbled and continued ushering Ryuko towards the entrance, this time at a more hurried pace.

Akio continued his long walk, lost in thought. He was so lost in the depths of his own mind that he didn't even notice that Ryuko's outfit had reverted to that of a sailor's uniform.

How could he not space out? He got to witness firsthand the strength of a Kamui wearer. She withstood strike after strike from Fukuroda, not even budging an inch. He was a Two Star, and she didn't even flinch in their fight. It was almost scary how strong she was. He had

never seen anything like it. He was beginning to doubt that even a Three Star would be able to beat Ryuko after she had gotten used to wearing the Kamui.

It was a weird think that clothing could give you this much power.

"Hey."

Ryuko's voice drew him from his thoughts.

"This is far enough."

Akio blinked and looked around. They had made it out of the courtyard of the Academy and were currently on the outskirts of the slums.

"Huh," Akio remarked and turned back to Ryuko. "Are you sure you can walk on your own?"

"Yes, *Mom*. "

Ryuko pushed herself away from Akio, stumbling slightly but able to stand on her own two feet.

"Why do you even care?" Ryuko asked, her eyes narrowing. "I don't even know your name first name."

"Really?" Akio rose an eyebrow. "It seems like it's been said a lot."

"This is Akio!" Mako answered for him. "He's in our class, don't you remember?"

"Yes, I know that, Mako," Ryuko replied with a roll of her eyes. "I just don't understand why he's helping me so much. From what I've seen, most of the people in this place couldn't give two shits about me except for you, Mako."

Akio opened his mouth to answer, but once again Mako had beaten him to the punch.

"Cuz he's a nice guy! Akio is always looking out for us No Stars," Mako smiled and patted Akio on the head. "Which reminds me, you *are* joining us for supper tonight. No exceptions!"

Akio was going to object, but the glare Ryuko was giving him made him rethink his answer.

"Alright then," Akio smiled and removed the hand from his head. "I'd love to."

"Off we go!"

Mako and Akio began to walk forwards, stopping when they realized that Ryuko wasn't following them.

Akio looked behind him, finding that Ryuko was passed out on the ground.

"Of course."

"It's good to see you again, Akio," Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled at the teen from across the floor level table they were sitting at. "It's always nice to have someone with table manners at our dinners."

"It's good to see you too, Mrs. Mankanshoku," Akio smiled. "And believe me, with cooking like yours I have a hard time keeping my manners in check."

Mrs. Mankanshoku giggled and waved him off. "Oh, please. Flattery will get you nowhere, Akio."

Akio chuckled and took a sip from the tea Mrs. Mankanshoku had gotten him, savoring its warmth.

"So," Mrs. Mankanshoku leaned forwards, placing her chin in her hands. "Who's your girlfriend?"

Akio quirked an eyebrow over his teacup, taking a deep sip and setting it down.

"She's a new classmate of ours," Akio began. "She's had a pretty rough first day, so Mako and I thought that your husband might be able to stitch her up."

"Well, you've come to the right place! Barazo is the best back-alley doctor in Honnou City."

Akio grinned and took another sip of his tea. "Indeed he-"

The Mankanshoku's house shook down to its foundations, followed by a loud thud.

"YOU PERVERT! YOU DARE MAKE A MOVE ON ME, KNOWING THAT I'M THE KANTO VAGABOND, THE GUITAR CASE DRIFTER!?"

"Hmm," Mrs. Mankanshouku hummed and stood. "It sounds like your friend is awake. I'll go check on her."

Akio nodded, content to stay where he was seated. This didn't sound like something he should get involved in.

He could hear a few more shouts, followed by silence, followed by a few more thuds.

Akio took another sip of tea. *Yep. Not getting involved.*

There was several more seconds of silence before the door in front of him slid open, and the Mankanshoku family and Ryuko stepped out.

"Oh," Ryuko frowned when she notice Akio sitting at the table. "It's you."

"Is that a proper greeting to the person that carried you here?" Akio remarked and took another sip of tea. "You aren't that light, you

know."

"Why you-" Ryuko stepped forwards, rolling the sleeves up on her shirt. She stopped mid step, noticing the bandages around her stomach, arm, and leg for the first time.

"H-how did I-"

"Daddy treated you!" Mako answered and plopped down beside her mother, leaving her an open seat beside Akio. "You'd never guess it, but he's a back-alley doctor."

Ryuko sat down and looked to Akio for confirmation, who nodded.

"If you compare the number of people he's killed versus those he's saved, he's killed a lot more."

Akio choked on his tea, while a large, singular bead of sweat rolled down Ryuko's cheek.

"That's... a bad thing," Ryuko muttered.

"Don't worry about it," Mr. Mankanshoku waved her off. "The dead ones don't sue."

Akio leaned forwards, covering his mouth with his hand.

Dear God, I could have killed her!

"Oh, right!" Mrs. Mankanshoku pushed her husband aside, setting down a large pot of steaming soup. "I know it's nothing fancy, but eat all you like!"

Mrs. Mankanshoku shoveled croquettes filled with mystery ingredients on the plate in the center of the table. Akio stared at them fondly, remembering just how good they were the last time he had had them.

"Go ahead, Ryuko!" Mako smiled sweetly at her friend. "Don't be shy! It's unidentifiable stuff made into croquettes, and unidentifiable stuff made into miso soup!"

"Oh, you!" Mrs. Mankanshoku laughed and kissed the top of her daughter's head. "I use only non-poisonous ingredients!"

Ryuko slowly turned her head to Akio, who had experienced more of the Mankanshoku's dinners than she had.

Akio met her gaze, nodding softly and reaching out to fill his own plates with croquettes.

Ryuko grabbed a set of chopsticks to begin eating, but before she could Mataro began vacuuming in a handful of croquettes, washing it down with a large bowl of soup.

"Better dig in before I eat it all!"

Ryuko stared dumbly at the boy, her chopsticks suspended in mid air.

Recovering from her short trauma, Ryuko filled her plate with croquettes, but before she could even eat a single bite the door behind her slammed open, revealing a small dog in a hoodie.

The dog pounced on Ryuko's plate, gobbling at the food she had piled up.

Ryuko stared slack-jawed at the dog in front of her, an expression she was becoming used to in the Mankanshoku household.

"Down, Guts! Your food is out there!"

Mako grabbed Guts by his sweater, lifting him and flinging him at the closed window.

Without looking up from his plate, Mr. Mankanshoku opened the window, allowing Guts to fly past. But Guts was a persistent dog, and

he flew back in through the other window, landing in Ryuko's lap and licking at her empty plate.

Akio watched it all with a blank expression. He'd be lying if this didn't seem familiar. This was nearly a play-by-play of what had happened when he had his first dinner at the Mankanshoku household. That is, except for the information about Mr. Mankanshoku's track record.

"We call him Guts, cuz he eats with Gutso!" Mataro explained with Akio mouthing along to each word.

Ryuko sat still, her face unmoving.

"Don't just sit there!" Mako yelled and shoved croquettes into her gaping mouth. "Eat! Eat!"

Ryuko chewed slowly, still overcoming her feeling of shock and awe.

"Don't worry," Akio whispered to Ryuko. "This happens every time."

"Every time?"

"Every time."

Ryuko looked down at her plate dumbfounded. After a few seconds she shook off her surprise and went back to glaring at Akio.

"I still don't trust you."

"Understandable," Akio nodded and took a bite of croquette. Even if they were made with unidentifiable stuff, they were pretty damned good. "So go ahead, ask away. I know you want to."

"Fine," Ryuko replied and took a bite of her own. "That boxing douche said you were the former president of the club. Is that true?"

Akio stopped eating and turned to Ryuko, raising an eyebrow.

"You heard that?"

"Yeah."

"Then why didn't you jump in sooner?"

"Hey, this isn't about me, this is about you," Ryuko deflected.

"Besides, I was curious on who the hell you were."

"Fair enough," Akio said and turned back to his plate of food, taking a bite. "Yes, I was the former president of the boxing club, but at that time it was just the martial arts club."

Ryuko kept silent, urging him to continue.

"In fact, the club got popular enough that I was given a Two Star Goku uniform, and that was actually when I quit. Fukuroda took over, and he officially changed it to the boxing club because he thought it would bring in more members, which in turn would increase his power."

"Huh?" Ryuko blinked. "Why did you quit? It seems like those dorky outfits makes people a lot stronger."

"They do," Akio nodded. "Don't get me wrong, the power was tantalizing. I nearly accepted it, but it just felt... wrong. It felt like I'd be strong not because I worked hard, but because I was wearing some uniform. It was then I realized that it wasn't the clothing that made the man, but the man that made the man."

Akio frowned at Ryuko.

"Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah, it does," Ryuko mumbled and tilted her head down, letting her bangs cover her eyes. "I guess that means I'm weak for using-"

"No."

Ryuko lifted her head, staring curiously at Akio.

"You have answers that you seek," Akio continued. "To get those answers, you need power. That outfit gives you that power. Do not feel weak for wearing it. If anything, you're stronger for doing so."

"... What do you mean?"

"Like I said, such power can be tantalizing. It takes a level head and a strong heart to be able to control it and use it to your advantage."

Ryuko hummed and turned back to her plate, absently poking at her food.

"I assume you have another question?"

"Yes, I do," Ryuko replied softly, watching Akio from beneath her bangs. "Why did you help me and Mako today?"

Akio blinked. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Lots of reasons. For one, I'm not exactly the most favorable person around here right now. By helping me and Mako out, you shined a bright light on yourself. You gained nothing from helping us out. If anything, you made life harder for yourself."

Akio remained silent for several seconds, then snorted and shook his head.

Ryuko furrowed her brow. "What?"

"If that's how you really view people, you have a lonely road ahead of you."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Next question."

Ryuko growled but didn't follow up on Akio's statement.

The two remained silent for awhile, both absentmindedly eating from their plates of food.

"Do... do you know who killed my father?"

Akio looked up from his plate, meeting Ryuko's unwavering gaze. Her eyes were steady and firm, but underneath that charade there was an innocent sadness to them. The eyes of a young girl that just wanted to know what happened to her poor father.

"No..." Akio tilted his head down. "No, I don't. I'm sorry."

A few hours later, Akio stumbled back into his apartment, nearly overcome by his tiredness.

"Hey," Aikuro poked his head up from his spot on the couch. "Where have you been? It's nearly midnight."

"Sorry," Akio mumbled and walked over to their mini fridge. "Had dinner with Ryuko and the Mankanshoku's."

"Oh," Aikuro responded absently. "I imagine that was entertaining."

Akio scoffed. "Like you wouldn't believe."

Akio examined the contents of their fridge, pulling out a can of beer and opening it. He brought the can to his lips, nearly downing the whole thing in one gulp.

"Ah," He sighed contently. "I think I'll take you up on that beer now."

Author's Notes:

So there ya have it!

Akio's specialty is mixed martial arts! I thought it'd be an interesting change of pace, since most of the characters in this

show use swords, guns, or DTRs. Except for Fight Club Mako, that is.

And as some pointed out, Akio does have ties to Nudist Beach. That'll be explained more later on. Can't show my whole hand just yet :^).

It's been done a few times on here, but I really do enjoy having the OC character being roomies with Aikuro. I think that's pretty neat.

Thanks for reading guys! Until next time!

Developments

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the third installment of Before My Body is Dry!

I enjoyed writing this chapter, as it's got some fun character interactions, including one you might not have expected. Personally, I love writing conversation scenes. There's so much you can get across with just a single conversation, and so many feelings that can be expressed by just a few simple words.

Anyhoo, I decided to split this chapter into two parts, this one and the next one. Originally, I planned on finishing the conflict with the tennis president, but this chapter would have been too long. Plus, I didn't want it to feel rushed.

So this one is a bit shorter, but I hope you like it!

Sit back, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill, that's Trigger.

Akio walked through the Academy hallway, lazily sipping at his thermos filled with coffee. It was a borderline crime to not have coffee this early in the morning. Even if it was against school rules to have drinks inside of the Academy itself, that didn't stop him. Coffee was one of the necessities of life.

Akio glanced around the hallway as he walked. It was surprisingly empty, given the time of day. Usually students would be shooting through the halls like a pack of wild animals, making sure they weren't late to class. Unlike most schools, Honnouji Academy didn't

have a 'three strike' policy. If you were late once, you were screwed. Ira Gamagoori made sure of that.

He walked into his homeroom, his thermos of coffee stopping on his lips.

It was empty.

"Hey, Mr. Mikisugi," Akio began and turned to the front of the room. "Where is-"

Akio's words died in his throat. There, standing at the front of the room next to his teacher, was Satsuki Kiryuin herself.

She was standing straight and dignified, her arms crossed across her chest. Her eyes were watching Akio closely, not blinking even once. The air of confidence and superiority she gave off was almost suffocating. He almost felt bad for not kneeling in her presence.

Akio repressed the urge to gulp. It wasn't everyday he got to talk to Satsuki Kiryuin, let alone have her seek him out like this. Hell, the only time he had any prolonged conversation with her was the other day when he stood up for Ryuko and the day he quit from the martial arts club. Other than that, the two hadn't even exchanged a simple 'hello' to each other. That's the way he wanted to keep it, too. If he was being honest, Satsuki scared the shit out of him. She was intelligent, more intelligent than Akio liked. And with the aura she gave off, it almost seemed like she knew everything. Shit, she probably did. It was obvious to anyone that Honnouji Academy was her jungle, and she was the lioness of it. He just hoped she wasn't as smart as she seemed, for everyone's sake.

"Lady Satsuki," Akio bowed. "I can't say I was expecting to see you here. To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence this morning?"

"Good morning, Takahiro."

Satsuki took a step away from Aikuro, closing the distance in-between Akio and herself.

Akio's eyes drifted to Aikuro's, who gave a very slight shrug in response. It seemed that he had no idea why she was here either.

"I have just one question for you."

"Of course," Akio nodded. "What is it that you want to know?"

"What are your designs with Matoi?"

"Designs?" Akio blinked. "I don't know what you mean."

"Is that so?"

"Like I had said the other day, she's new here. It'd be rude of me not to help out my fellow student, especially a transfer student."

Satsuki's eyes searched Akio's for several moments, before they narrowed slightly. Akio knew that was a weak argument, but he really didn't have anything else he could stand on. They both knew that Ryuko had been tearing around the countryside, raising hell at each of the high schools that she attended. There was no way that a student that was privy to that information would help Ryuko out, or even give her the time of day. Akio could only pray that Satsuki didn't know that he knew about her track record.

"How kind of you. If only our other students were as courteous as you."

Satsuki prolonged the eye contact, giving a pregnant pause. After what felt like hours, she turned and walked to the door, all the while keeping her back turned to the two.

"That's all I needed. I apologize for the intrusion, Mr. Mikisugi. And Takahiro?" Satsuki turned her head back, her eyes meeting Akio's momentarily. "I'll ignore the fact that you have a beverage on Academy grounds. Good day."

And with that, Lady Satsuki left the classroom, leaving both Akio and Aikuro sweating.

Akio shifted his gaze to Aikuro, who was giving him a very pointed, 'I told you so' look. It seemed Aikuro and Ryuko were right. He had been a little too transparent with his actions.

Akio closed his eyes and let out the shiver he had been holding in. That was unnerving, to say the least. He wasn't that thirsty for coffee anymore either.

He put his coffee down on a desk, running a hand through his hair as his eyes drifted towards the classroom window. It was a surprisingly nice day outside. Sunny, warm, not even a cloud in the sky.

His eyes wandered to the courtyard grounds. There seemed to be a commotion, of some sorts. A crowd of students were gathered around two singular students, one wearing a school uniform, and one wearing a black-

"Son of a bitch," Akio cursed under his breath. He thought that they'd at least wait until after classes ended to go after Ryuko. After all, with the Academy's strict no tardy policy, he thought that they'd want to get to class on time. How foolish of him.

"I'll be right back, Mr. Mikisugi," Akio said and walked to the door.

"Where are you going, Takahiro? Class is about to start."

"My stomach is killing me," Akio replied and rubbed his belly. "I feel like I might puke."

"Alright," Aikuro nodded and looked to his attendance sheet, marking off Akio's name. "I'll put you down as present, but you better hurry back."

"Thanks, teacher," Akio replied, fighting the urge to smirk. "I'll be back soon, I promise."

Akio walked through the sewers, mumbling under his breath. OF COURSE she had to fall into the sewer system, and OF COURSE he had to be the one that retrieved her. A student missing from class was one thing, but a teacher was another. There was no way that Aikuro could skip a class and get away with it scot-free.

Akio cursed a few more times under his breath and kept walking through the ill lit and smelly sewers.

Today was just not his day.

After this, Ryuko at least owed him a steak dinner, or something. He'd rather fight a Three Star then deal with this crap. At least this section of the sewers only carried run-off water, and not human waste. He probably would have quit by now if he had to walk next to a river of feces and piss.

Akio exited the tunnel he was walking through, which had led into a giant chamber that the water and pipes led to.

He looked around the chamber, searching for Ryuko's body. If she had fallen into the water, this was the most likely place that she would end up.

His eyes traveled up the waterfall of run-off water at the opposite end of the chamber, finding Ryuko's body hanging over the ledge. The straps of her outfit were caught in the bars at the top, stopping her from falling completely into the giant pool of water underneath her.

It was going to be one hell of a task to get her down from there.

Akio sighed. It was times like this that he wished that he had Aikuro's job.

About an hour later, Akio stood outside his apartment, staring dumbly at the door in front of him. It was going to be pretty difficult to

open it, seeing that his arms were full with an unconscious teenage girl.

He grumbled under his breath and kicked the door as if it would magically open at the touch of his foot.

Of course it didn't.

Akio sighed.

He prayed to God that none of his neighbors would walk by at this moment in time. That would be a pretty awkward conversation trying to convince someone that he did not roofie this poor girl to bring her back to his place.

He carefully placed her down on the ground beside his door, deciding that that was the best course of action. He opened the door to his apartment, then picked Ryuko back up and walked in, closing the door with his foot on the way in.

Akio walked over to his couch, placing her down gently on its cushioned surface.

Now came the hard part. He had to take her uniform off. It was soaking wet, and if he left it on she'd probably get pneumonia or something. And he highly doubted that Mr. Mankanshoku could treat pneumonia.

Besides, it'd be easier to show her how to use it if she wasn't still wearing.

Akio stood over her with his hands on his hips, wondering how to go about it.

He really should have considered recruiting Mako's help before going through with this.

Akio took a deep breath to calm himself, then went to work. He started by undoing the straps that connected her top to her skirt, and

carefully pulled her shirt over her head as to not disturb her. He then moved to her skirt, slowly pulling it down and off her legs. He tried his best to ignore the white and blue patterns of her undergarments as he went to work. It'd be incredibly rude of him if he admired the form of an unconscious girl. Plus, he'd be lying if this whole turn of events didn't make him feel incredibly weird. Gawking would only make it so much worse.

Grabbing the blanket that was draped over the back of the couch, he laid it across Ryuko's sleeping form, making sure to cover her entire body.

With the hard part finished, Akio sighed in relief and sat down in the rickety wooden chair that was beside the couch. He grabbed his book off the coffee table, content to read until Ryuko woke up. He thanked the powers that be that she hadn't woken up while he was undressing her. That would have been one conversation that had no possible good end.

He kicked his feet up on the table and leaned back in his chair, his eyes slowly taking in each and every word of the book in front of him.

The hours flew by like seconds, and before he knew it, Akio had finished his book.

"Hemmingway sure likes to write depressing endings," Akio remarked to himself and threw the book on the table.

Great. Now I have nothing to do.

Akio sighed and rolled his head, popping his neck.

...

He was actually out of things to do. That really was his only fallback.

Am... am I boring?

Shaking the destructive thoughts from his head, he decided to throw caution to the wind and examine Ryuko's sleeping form.

She was sleeping surprisingly peacefully given the circumstances, her chest rising and falling slowly as she inhaled and exhaled.

Akio couldn't help but notice how innocent she looked in this state. For as long as he had known her, which wasn't that long, she had always had a stern or angry expression on her face. Rarely did she seem so tranquil, so fragile. It was almost as if he was staring at a completely different person.

He had only known Ryuko the fighter; the girl that was hell-bent on tearing Honnouji Academy down by its seams, not Ryuko the regular teenage girl. It was an odd thing, seeing the difference between conscious Ryuko and unconscious Ryuko. It was like night and day.

Other than that, her face was spotted with yellow and purple bruises, which he could only assume was caused by the tennis club's president. Which was weird. Given the beating Akio had seen her take, he had expected the damage to be a whole lot worse. She must have been stronger than he originally gave her credit for.

Akio hastily looked away when Ryuko's eyes slowly fluttered open. Sitting up on the couch, she rubbed at her eyes groggily. She looked around the apartment, confusion written on her face clear as day.

"Where the hell am I?"

"Good morning, Matoi. Or should I say good afternoon."

Ryuko flinched, spinning in her seat to face Akio.

"W-what!? What the fuck are you doing here?"

"You're in my home," Akio answered simply, keeping his eyes up at the ceiling and away from Ryuko's near naked form.

"Wait a second. This is where you live?"

"Yep."

Ryuko blinked a few times, taking all of the information in. She looked around the apartment curiously, eventually noticing that the blanket that once covered her body had completely fallen off. She gaped at her near naked form, a blush rising to her cheeks.

"Hang on, you didn't undress me, did you?"

Akio gulped and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

"Yeah... sorry about that. You were soaking wet, I was worried you might get sick."

"Wow. Thanks again, *Mom*," Ryuko deadpanned, glaring daggers at him and pushing the blanket back over her chest. "Where's the clothes I was wearing anyway?"

Akio jerked a thumb at the cabinet to the left of the couch, where the Kamui she was wearing was resting on a hanger. Ryuko's eyes followed to where he was pointing, sighing in relief when she caught sight of it.

Akio rose from his seat, pacing over to the mini fridge at the other side of the room.

"You want anything to drink?" Akio asked, turning his head back to glance at her.

"Uh... what do you have?"

Akio opened the fridge, examining its contents.

"Water. Water and beer."

"I'll have a beer then."

Akio chuckled and grabbed two cans from the fridge. "Good choice."

He walked back to where he was once sitting, tossing Ryuko a can and sitting down.

The two opened their cans in unison, both taking deep sips from their cooled beverages. They sat in an awkward silence, getting more and more engrossed in their drinks. After all, cans couldn't talk and make things more awkward.

"How'd I even get here, anyways?" Ryuko asked, deciding to break the silence.

"After that beating you took from the tennis president, you fell into the sewers," Akio paused, noticing Ryuko had gone green. "Don't worry, it was just run-off water. Not what you're thinking."

"Oh," Ryuko sighed in relief. "Then I assume you brought me here?"

"Yep," Akio nodded. "I can't tell you how awkward it was carrying unconscious girl through the slums, for a *second* time. I got a few stares, to say the least."

Ryuko snorted, but didn't say anything else.

"So," Akio began and took another sip from his drink. "I imagine you're wondering why your Kamui didn't work earlier."

"Kamui?" Ryuko rose an eyebrow, realization washing over her face when she deciphered what Akio had meant. "Oh, you mean Senketsu?"

"Sure."

"That would be pretty useful, yeah."

Akio sat his drink down and walked over to the cabinets on the other side of the room, opening one of the drawers and pulling out a packaged syringe.

"W-wait a second," Ryuko stammered and scooted away when he sat down beside her. "Why do you have a needle?"

"To show you how to use your Kamui, of course."

"Isn't there another way you could do that?"

Akio rose an eyebrow. "What's wrong with this?"

Ryuko looked away, a slight blush tinting her cheeks. "I don't like needles."

Akio snickered and stood back up, walking back to the cabinets and replacing the syringe for a knife.

"Who would have thought that Ryuko Matoi, the fabled Guitar Case Drifter, would be scared of needles?"

"I might be half naked, but I'll still kick your ass."

Akio snickered again, sitting back down next to Ryuko and taking her hand in his.

Ryuko's eyes shifted between her hand and Akio, eventually settling for a hardened glare at the teenage boy.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Akio rolled his eyes, ignoring her remark.

"Just take a sip of your beer and look away."

Ryuko did as she was told, albeit very reluctantly. She lifted her head up and away, taking a huge gulp of her beverage.

"You're lucky I'm the one doing this and not my roommate."

"You have a roommate?"

"Yeah, my brother."

Ryuko turned back to him and blinked. "You have a brother?"

"Yep," Akio smirked. "You probably know him too."

Akio placed the blade against her index finger, swiping the sharpened edge across her skin.

"Ow! What the hell was that for!?"

"Shut up and be patient."

Akio rubbed his index and middle finger against the wound, smearing her blood against his skin.

Rising from his seat, he walked over to where her Kamui was hanging. He rubbed his bloody fingers against the cloth, then hastily took a few steps away from it.

The minute Ryuko's blood made contact with the cloth, it began to glow a bright purple as it transformed. The front of the sailor uniform seemed to turn into a face, with a giant orange and yellow eyeball on the left side of the collar. The collar had also expanded outwards, giving the face what looked like giant, red eyebrows.

The Kamui began to shake violently, its sleeves flinging every which way as it wiggled around.

Ryuko watched her outfit intently, as if it were actually speaking and having a conversation with her.

"You awake now, Senketsu?"

Akio quirked an eyebrow, curiously watching the scene play out. It seemed a little odd that she was talking to her clothing, but maybe he was just missing something. He hadn't remembered Aikuro mentioning anything about her being able to talk to it. Or maybe he had and Akio just forgot.

"Dumbass! Why didn't you wake up when I needed you!?"

"Now, now," Akio interjected and stepped towards the Kamui. Apparently she could. "It isn't Senketsu's fault."

"It sure seems that way," Ryuko grumbled.

Akio gave an exasperated sigh. "Did you not just see what I did?"

Ryuko didn't say anything, content to let Akio explain himself.

"If you were paying attention, you would have noticed that your Kamui awakens when it comes into contact with your blood. This Kamui, or Senketsu as you call it, was created by Isshin Matoi. Its power surpasses even that the Goku uniforms, as you've seen already."

Ryuko's eyes widened. "You knew my father?"

"Sort of," Akio replied and looked away. "I had only met him a few times."

"Oh," Ryuko whispered, turning her head down.

The two sat in silence for a few minutes, neither having the heart to speak up. Akio bit back a curse. He really did wish he knew more, but he just didn't. Instead of addressing it, he decided to move past it.

"If you want to defeat Kiryuin you need to master this Kamui," He continued. "If you do so, there's no doubt in my mind that you can surpass her and get the answers you seek."

"Hang on a second," Ryuko's lifted her head, narrowing her eyes. "How the hell do you know all of this? Just who the hell are you?"

Akio met Ryuko's eyes, his gaze stern. "I'm an ally. A friend. For now, that's all you need to know."

"That's a load of shit," Ryuko replied indignantly. "Surely you can tell me more than that."

"Look, if you can prove to me that you're someone that deserves an answer, I'll fill you in on everything I know. The first order of business would be taking down that tennis president, Omiko Hakodate."

"... Fine," Ryuko grunted and rose from her seat, grinding her fist into her hand. "But when I beat that tennis bitch into a pulp, you will tell me *everything*."

"That's what I just said," Akio rolled his eyes, a slight smirk forming on his lips. "You know, you can probably put your clothes back on. I'm sure they're dry by now."

Ryuko looked down at her near bare chest and pelvis, letting out a surprisingly girlish squeal and yanked Senketsu off of the hangar, hurriedly putting it on.

"No good smart-ass..." Ryuko grumbled under her breath, pulling her skirt back on.

Resisting the urge to laugh, Akio rose from his chair. As if on cue, the sound of a siren began screeching over the intercoms, signaling the beginning of afternoon classes. He walked over to the cabinet that the Kamui was once hanging on, opening it up and pulling out a red glove that had bits of steel on the knuckles.

"Here," Akio said and handed the glove to Ryuko. "Use this Seki Tekko from now on. It will make it easier for you to supply that Senketsu of yours with blood."

Ryuko nodded and accepted the glove, immediately pulling it on over her hand.

"Just pull that pin and you'll be good to go."

"Alright. This has been... confusing, to say the least," Ryuko rubbed the back of her head, smiling slightly. "But thanks? I guess?"

Akio returned the smile and nodded. "It's my pleasure."

Ryuko walked to the door to make her leave, stopping when she noticed Akio was following her.

"What?" Akio asked and raised an eyebrow at Ryuko's stare. "Did you already forget that I'm a student too?"

Ryuko scowled and mumbled something about a 'smart-ass' under her breath, then paced out of the room leaving Akio in her dust.

Author's Notes:

So there ya have it! Like I said, I enjoyed writing this chapter. I know my story is about an OC, but man, I really do enjoy writing Ryuko and Satsuki's characters. Ryuko is just so stubborn and up in your face about everything, but she has this softer side to her that she occasionally shows. While Satsuki is more reserved, with a dignified feeling of superiority about her. And we all know that she's a god damned GENIUS.

Next chapter we'll get to the final showdown with the tennis president, as well as Akio's promise to fill Ryuko in on everything he knows.

Thanks for reading everyone!

Until next time!

Connections

Hey everyone, and welcome to the fourth installment of Before My Body is Dry!

I'm actually pretty pleased with how this one turned out. With the first few episodes of the show, I'm a little shackled to keeping it true to the plot since they're pretty key to the story. But as the story progresses, I've been able to add some more originality, some of my own flair. I have some big plans for some completely original scenes coming on down the road, so I'm looking forward to getting there.

Anyhoo, I hope you guys like this chapter. I really appreciate all of the reviews, follows, and favorites so far fellas.

Disclaimer: Kill la Kill belongs to Trigger, not I.

Ryuko and Akio walked towards the towering entrance of Honnouji Academy, their faces set in determination - Ryuko's more so than Akio's. After all, he was just the observer in this situation (or at least, that's what he told himself). Ryuko, on the other hand, wanted her answers. She had been searching for her father's killer for a while now, and every little bit of information was gold to her. If she had to beat some tennis club president into a pulp, so be it. It was her fault for getting in her way anyhow.

Ryuko rolled her neck and popped her knuckles, a predatory grin growing on her face.

"Where do you think she'll be?"

"Hmm," Akio hummed and rubbed his chin. "I'm not sure. I assume the tennis courts."

"Well, no shit Sherlock. Where are those?"

"I... I uh..." Akio blinked. "I don't know, actually."

"What?" Ryuko stopped walking to glare at him. "How do you not know? Haven't you been here longer than I have?"

"Hey, give me a break," Akio replied with a frown. "Do I look like I play tennis to you?"

"How would I know that? Apparently I'm not 'someone who deserves answers' just yet."

Ryuko huffed and walked off, forcing Akio to speed up to catch up with her.

"Knowing these people, I doubt you'll have to look very far," Akio said as he fell into step with her.

"Hmph."

The two continued walking, eventually making it past the entrance and into the courtyard.

"See?" Akio smirked. "I told you."

The Academy's courtyard was filled with tennis players, who looked to be in the middle of one of their practices. Akio could see the tennis president, Omiko Hakodate, standing beside Uzu Sanageyama. They seemed to be in the middle of discussing something, which Akio could only assume was Ryuko.

Akio glanced around the courtyard, his eyes wandering to a large clump of students circled around a single student. The students in the circle seemed to be pelting tennis balls at a student that was immobile and tied up.

Akio's eyes widened. "Mako?"

Akio's expression darkened at seeing his friend tied up, his eyes gleaming with murderous intent. He'd be lying if he didn't have a bit

of soft spot for the brown haired wonder that was Mako. Seeing them beat on her like that lit a fire in his chest, one of pure anger and animosity.

Judging from the look on her face, Ryuko seemed to have the same feelings. She began to stalk forwards, taking her guitar case in her hands.

The circle of tennis players lined up for another volley, tossing their balls into the air to smack towards Mako.

The tennis balls tore through the air, barreling towards their target.

Clang!

The balls smacked into Ryuko's guitar case, stopping them from hitting Mako. Ryuko lowered her case, her vicious glare sending shivers down most of the students' spines.

"Why, you!"

One of the braver students through another ball up into the air, slamming it towards the two girls.

Smack!

The ball collided with Akio's waiting hand. With a snarl he threw the ball back at the sender, nailing her in square in the face.

"Ow!"

The girl fell to the ground, clutching at her broken nose as she rolled around on the floor.

"Ryuko! Akio!"

Akio smiled smugly and reached to his waistband, pulling out the knife he had from earlier. With a single swipe, he cut the bindings that held Mako.

"Well," Uzu stepped forwards. "If it isn't the transfer student and her lackey."

"Lackey?" Akio's eye twitched as he turned to Uzu. "Who are *you* calling lackey, Sanageyma. Tell me, how does the ground taste? I assume you'd know since you're always kissing it after Kiryuin walks by."

Uzu barred his teeth, reaching to his back to grab his bamboo sword. "What was that, you son of a--"

"Hey," Ryuko interjected. "You guys can have your pissing contest later. I have a score to settle."

"Hmph," The two boys huffed and crossed their arms, turning away from each other.

"Men, such animals," Hakodate rolled her eyes and walked towards Ryuko. "So, you've come for another beating, eh transfer student?"

"I don't think so," Ryuko grinned and grabbed the pin on her wrist. "This time I'm going to knock you on your ass! Let's go Senketsu!"

She pulled the pin, feeding her blood to the Kamui. Within seconds, bright, red star-shaped flashes began emanating from her uniform. They were so bright, that Akio had to raise his arm to cover his eyes from their piercing light. When he lowered it, Ryuko was standing tall, her outfit having reverted to how it was when she had fought the boxing club president. Even the predominant blush with it.

In other words, it was revealing. It was definitely revealing.

"That looks both painful and embarrassing, you masochistic exhibitionist!"

"Bite me!" Ryuko retorted. "And the tennis club president? Judging by your looks, I'd say you should have joined the dentist club!"

Ryuko looked back to Akio, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Get it? Cuz her teeth are all fucked up and pointy."

Akio snorted and shook his head. "Really going for the low hanging fruit on that one."

Hakodate ground her jagged teeth, her grip tightening on her large, red tennis racket.

"Let's see if you're as smarmy after this! One hundred and ten million serves!"

The tennis club members lined up behind their president, each throwing up a ball to hit towards Ryuko. In unison, the group and the president fired their volley towards the girl.

"Heh."

Ryuko flung her case away, holding her scissor blade in hand. Faster than even Akio could follow, she sliced through the air, stopping the tennis balls in their tracks. The balls hit the ground, exploding into a bunch of yellow fiber.

"Fault!"

Akio and Ryuko turned towards Uzu, each quirking an eyebrow.

"You're disqualified, transfer student!"

"Huh?"

"True, you've evaded Hakodate's attack, but slicing balls in half is against the rules of the match. In other words, you've won the fight but lost the match!"

"What are you even talking about?"

"It's simple, what you're standing on is a tennis court!"

Ryuko and Akio both looked down to their feet, noticing the green and white court for the first time.

Ryuko scratched her head. "When the hell did that get here?"

"You know what that means? You can't say you've won if you haven't won according to the rules of tennis!"

"What? Why are you getting all picky now!?" Ryuko exclaimed, waving her arms around frantically. "What about yesterday!"

"That was yesterday."

"This is crazy! When we were boxing-"

"It doesn't matter," Uzu replied childishly and turned his head away. "You're disqualified!"

"No! She won!"

Everyone turned their heads towards Mako as she slid up next to her friend, placing her hand on Ryuko's breast plate.

"Ryuko won! She won!"

Mako skittered around Ryuko, emphasizing each of her words by pointing towards Ryuko.

"Uh..." Uzu blinked. "What?"

"Ryuko helped rescued me!" Mako replied and hopped into Ryuko's arms, jumping out of them as soon as she had done so. "She may have lost the match, but she won with friendship!"

Ryuko stood motionless as Mako jumped around her, occasionally jumping into her arms, among a whole bunch of other things.

"Winning with friendship means winning at life!"

"Listen up!" Mako pointed a menacing finger at Uzu and Hakodate, her body seemingly towering over theirs. "If you're going to be like that, you leave her no choice! Ryuko will win, Ryuko will win! Even in tennis, even in tennis, even in tennis she'll win!"

"Well then," Akio smirked and handed Ryuko a stray tennis racket. "Looks like you're up. Knock 'em dead."

"I guess so," Ryuko blinked a few times and shook the cobwebs from her brain. She accepted the racket from Akio and strode forwards, rolling up invisible sleeves on her biceps. "Let's do this!"

Akio stood in the crowd of students next to Mako, his arms crossed as he watched Ryuko and Hakodate take the field. With the push of a button, Uzu had been able to construct a tennis arena. And unsurprisingly, the nearly ten foot walls of the arena were studded with razor sharp spikes. What that had to do with tennis, Akio would never know.

"I'm watching, Ryuko!" Mako screeched and waved her arms at Ryuko's back.

"Special rules!" Uzu announced from his raised seat. "The match is one game! Decide who serves first!"

"She's the rookie, I'll let her decide," Hakodate said and twirled her racket.

"I'll take you up on that," Ryuko smirked and bounced a tennis ball on the ground. She bent over, preparing to serve. The crowd behind her blushed as the streams of blood gushed from their noses.

Ryuko threw the ball up in the air, smacking it so hard with the racket that the strings nearly snapped.

Hakodate rushed towards the oncoming ball, smacking back with equal force. Ryuko was able to run it down, smacking it back before

the ball hit the wall behind her.

Hakodate returned it, sending it back towards Ryuko. Ryuko brought her racket up to hit the ball back, but the force was too much. The ball tore through the racket's strings, flying into the spikes behind her.

"Love-fifteen!"

"Heh," Ryuko chuckled and tossed her racket away. "Not bad."

"I'm just getting warmed up. You're only now beginning to learn the might of the tennis-spec, athleticism-augmenting, Two-Star uniform I received from Lady Satsuki!"

"Hmph," Ryuko bounced a ball on the ground, throwing it up in the air for a serve. "Interesting!"

Hakodate laughed and returned the serve, nailing the ball so hard that it broke the ground up when it hit it.

"Not this time!"

Ryuko swung her racket, the ball connecting with the metal of her racket. The ball spun on the metal, traveling up the length of the handle and smashing into her face.

"Oof!"

The ball sent Ryuko spinning into the air and careening towards where Akio and Mako were standing.

"Good lord," Akio mumbled and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Love-thirty!"

Ryuko's body crashed into the wall, cracking the foundation. The only thing that kept her from falling to the ground was that her legs were arched over the spikes in a very, very compromising position.

Mako tried to cover her eyes, but the temptation appeared to much for her, since her fingers were spaced apart and her eyes were bulging at the sight. The crowd around them exploded in a stream of nose bleeds, their eyes glued on to Ryuko's crotch.

"Ryuko! You naughty, naughty girl!" Mako shouted.

Akio picked her up by the ankles and tossed her back down on to the court, doing her a favor by getting her out of that rather provocative position. Ryuko hit the ground with a thud, but quickly picked herself up from the pavement. She glared at her opponent as her Kamui emitted blasts of steam, the straps and clothing tightening on her skin.

Akio cupped his hands to his mouth. "Ryuko!"

She turned back to glance at him, an eyebrow raised in question.

Akio pulled the scissor blade from the concrete wall he stood behind and tossed it to her.

"Use the scissor blade!"

Ryuko caught the blade in the air without looking, twirling it around her body and bringing the blade in front of her. She nodded to herself, then reached down to her skirt and pulled out a thread, bringing it up to the hilt of her blade and wrapping it around it so that it resembled that of a racket.

"Right then," Ryuko grinned and set her feet. "This will work!"

"You can't be serious!" Hakodate exclaimed.

Uzu blew on his whistle. "Faul-"

A blinding orange and yellow light erupted from above the courtyard, emanating from the giant tower of Honnouji Academy.

"It's all right," Lady Satsuki's voice echoed throughout the plaza.
"Play along Hakodate. Show her the power of your Two-Star."

"Yes, milady," Hakodate bowed.

"As you wish," Uzu followed suit, his eye twitching in annoyance at Akio's loud snicker.

"Satsuki Kiryuin," Ryuko growled, her hands tightening around her blade. "You're watching from high, issuing orders to your lackeys, same as always. It's creepy."

Satsuki smiled slightly. "You're going to show me just how much of that Kamui's power you can tap into."

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched, her nostrils flaring. "You bitch! You know that this thing is called a Kamui!"

"Not so fast. Your opponent is right over there."

Ryuko turned her glare back to Hakodate, readying her scissor blade to serve.

"Show me what you've got, then."

Ryuko threw the ball into the air, smacking it back down with tremendous force.

Hakodate countered her movements, moving to the right and returning the hit.

Before the ball had even crossed the net, Ryuko had jumped into the air, intercepting the ball mid air.

"W-what!?"

With a shout, Ryuko flung the ball at Hakodate, nailing her in the face and sending her flying into the concrete wall behind her. The wall exploded with her impact, sending rubble and students flying

every which way. Hakodate bounced off the wall, flying back towards Ryuko as she flipped head over heel through the air.

Ryuko flipped the blade in her hand, grabbing it by the hilt and slashing out towards Hakodate's chest. The blade connected with her Goku uniform, sending it into thousands of scraps. A red string floated away from the wreckage, floating towards Ryuko and getting absorbed by her Kamui.

Hakodate's body landed on one of the wall's spikes, her front facing up. A crowd of students gathered around, gawking at the naked form of the tennis president.

"You did it, Ryuko!" Mako screeched.

Akio grinned, feeling an unexpected amount of relief wash over him.

I guess I was worried over nothing.

Akio's eyes traveled away from the grinning Ryuko to Uzu, who had been glaring daggers at Ryuko from the moment she had won. Akio frowned. That didn't look good.

He vaulted over the wall, walking over to Ryuko as soon as he hit the ground. Uzu stepped in front of her, a crowd of One-Stars standing behind the athletics' chair, ready to attack at a moment's notice.

"Don't get too full of yourself," Uzu growled. "Bitch."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Sanageyama," Akio replied, cracking his knuckles. "Matoi won fair and square. But if you're looking for a fight, I'd be happy to oblige."

"Ha! Like you could even hope to keep up with me, No-Star trash."

"Big words for a man with a bamboo sword," Akio retorted with a smirk.

"Wait, Sanageyema."

Uzu flinched, spinning around to see none other than Lady Satsuki herself standing behind him.

"Takahiro is right, as crudely as he may have put it. The victor of the match is that girl."

The crowd of students parted like the Red Sea to give their president space, all except Ryuko and Akio.

Akio glanced around, cursing under his breath. Well, if he didn't stand out before, he sure did now. No point in trying to be a kiss ass now, he supposed. Not that he was doing a great job to begin with.

Man, I am REALLY bad at this undercover business...

Ryuko scowled at Satsuki, raising her scissor blade and falling into stance.

"So, are you going to tell me? Are you the scissor blade woman?"

The crowd stood stark still, not daring to budge an inch.

Akio blinked. That was all it took and he had missed it.

A deep cut appeared in Senketsu's shoulder piece.

Akio gaped, slowly turning to face Satsuki. She stood completely still, a confident smile gracing her lips. Her sword was drawn from its sheathe and in her hands, its point resting a few inches above the ground.

"If you wish to know the answer, ask the question with your skill!"

Ryuko set her feet, her face covered with uncertainty. Satsuki appeared to be a much harsher opponent than she had given her credit for.

She tilted her head down, apparently speaking to herself.

"That's because you drank too much blood!" Ryuko said to Senketsu in a hushed whisper.

"Hmph," Satsuki raised her blade so that it was horizontal with her body. "This sword is Bakuzan. This blade can even cut a Kamui. Its edge is even keener than that scissor."

Satsuki charged forwards, bringing her blade up and swinging it downwards in an overhead strike.

Ryuko barely had time to bring up her blade to block it.

The two remained in a stalemate, both daring each other to make one tiny mistake that they could exploit.

A cloud of steam erupted from Ryuko's Kamui, hiding her form in its smoke.

"Huh?"

Akio felt a hand grip him by the collar, flinging him backwards and on his rear.

"Ow!"

Akio hit the ground with a thud, banging his head on a particularly sharp rock.

"What was that for!?" Akio glared at Ryuko who now stood above him.

"Mark my words!" Ryuko shouted, ignoring her whining companion. "Next time, I'll finish this once and for all! Let's roll guys!"

Another jet of steam erupted from Ryuko's Kamui, covering their escape as the trio ran away from the Academy's courtyard.

"You know, you didn't have to throw me," Akio grumbled as he ran, rubbing his head gingerly. "I can walk perfectly fine."

Ryuko glanced at Akio from the corner of her eye, a smirk growing on her lips.

"It's time to tell me what you know, lackey."

Ryuko and Akio sat in Akio and Aikuro's shared apartment, sitting in silence. Mako had left for the time being after Ryuko had assured her that she'd see her for dinner, and now here they were.

Akio sat in the rickety wooden chair next to the couch, his arms crossed as he still grumbled about the 'lackey' comment. Ryuko sat on the couch she had been only left a few hours ago, sitting crisscross and staring at Akio expectantly.

"So?"

"So, what? I'm just a lackey, remember?" Akio huffed. That lackey comment hurt. His poor pride was still wounded. "Don't you have to order me to do it?"

"Oh, get over it," Ryuko rolled her eyes, her lips tugging upwards in a smile. "So, are you going to tell me what I want to know?"

"Not yet."

"And why the hell not!? The deal was that if I beat up that tennis chick, you'd-"

"I'm going to tell you, don't worry," Akio reassured. "My partner just wanted me to wait until he got here this time."

"Fine," Ryuko replied hotly and glanced around the room, looking for anything to buy her time. Finding nothing, she glanced back to Akio. "So, what's your deal with that Sanageyama guy?"

"I don't like him."

"Oh wow, you don't say," Ryuko deadpanned and rolled her eyes. "Care to expand on that?"

"I don't like any of Kiryuin's henchman," Akio said flatly. "They look down on everyone, thinking they can treat people how they like because they have power. It's annoying."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Ryuko huffed and leaned back in her seat, letting her arms drape over the couch. "That caterpillar eye-browed bitch deserves to get taken down a peg. Or at least have the stick taken out of her ass."

Akio laughed and nodded. "Very true, very true."

The door to the apartment burst open, causing Akio and Ryuko to both look up at their new guest. Aikuro Mikisugi walked in all hunched over, his hands thrust in his pockets. He walked into the kitchen, grabbed himself a beer, then walked back to the living room, taking a seat on the windowsill in front of the couch.

"Hey, Akio," Aikuro greeted lazily, taking a sip. "Sorry I'm late."

"Don't worry about it."

"Wait," Ryuko blinked at their homeroom teacher. "Aren't you our teacher?"

"That's right," Aikuro ran a hand through his hair, taking his glasses off in the process. "Aikuro Mikisugi, at your service."

"Huh," Ryuko replied a bit uneasily at his sudden change in personality. She turned to Akio, quirking an eyebrow and jerking a thumb at Aikuro. "This guy's your brother, then?"

"I was adopted, but yeah."

"Ah, I guess that makes-" Ryuko stopped in her tracks, staring dumbstruck at Aikuro, whose shirt and tie were now on the ground. "W-what the hell is this!? Why are you undressing!?"

Ryuko glared at Akio. "Is this your idea of some fucked up joke? To hire a stripper?"

"Just ignore it. You get used to it."

"Just ignore it? *You get used to it* !? Jesus, he's about to whip out his-"

"Life fiber."

Ryuko stopped and turned back to Aikuro, blinking dumbly.

"What now?"

"It refers to fighting fibers that have a life of their own," Akio answered.

"Indeed. The fabric of One-Star Goku Uniforms are ten percent Life Fibers, while Two-Stars are thirty percent Life Fibers. As you have seen, these fibers enhance human strength and bring out special abilities."

"Now that you mention it..." Ryuko trailed off, remembering her two fights and how that red string had floated through the air and into Kamui. "That was a Life Fiber?"

"Yes," Akio nodded. "But that's not all. There exist in this world outfits woven entirely out of Life Fibers."

"These are the Kamui," Aikuro finished for him.

Ryuko glanced at her shirt. "Senketsu is one?"

"Indeed," Aikuro replied. "The only people who know the secret of the life fibers are the Kiryuin clan and your father, Dr. Isshin Matoi."

"We believe that the Kiryuin clan must have attacked Dr. Matoi to try and steal the Kamui he possessed and keep the secret for themselves," Akio continued.

"How do the two of you know all of this?"

"We hate the Kiryuin's despotism, too," Aikuro's eyes hardened as he placed a hand on his chest. "Akio and I had been working with Dr. Matoi to try and thwart their plans for world domination. Me more so than Akio, as he was still rather young at the time."

"Yes," Akio nodded. "After he had died, the two of us received a letter he had sent out before his death."

Aikuro closed his eyes, remembering Dr. Matoi's last wish. "'When I die, give you-know-what to my daughter. Like dead leaves in the forest.'"

"And keep my daughter safe for me where I have failed," Akio mumbled, remembering what the doctor had asked of him.

"So, my meeting of Senketsu was set up by you, then?" Ryuko asked Aikuro, then turned to Akio. "And I'm guessing that's why you stepped in the two times I got my ass handed to me?"

"That would be correct," Aikuro nodded. "And thanks to you coming home to the mansion, I was able to provide the perfect meeting spot."

"So like I thought, it was that Satsuki Kiryuin chick that killed my father?"

"Ehhhh," Akio shrugged slightly. "It might be. We can't say for sure."

"Fine, then," Ryuko frowned, grinding her fist into her palm. "I'll beat it out of her with my own two hands."

"Hmmm," Aikuro hummed and leaned back on the windowsill, staring listlessly out the window. "You see, Akio and I went undercover here at Honnouji Academy to try and uncover what the Kiryuins are up to. Since you know all of this now, do not make contact without precautions. We are teacher and student there, nothing else."

"Fair enough," Ryuko nodded. "What about Akio then?"

Aikuro turned away from the window, a slight smirk gracing his lips.

"What about Akio?"

"Should I stay away from him, too?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Akio interjected. "Given the nature of my job and my position, they were bound to get suspicious of me eventually."

"Ah, good."

Aikuro quirked an eyebrow at the response, his smirk growing.

"I have one more question," Ryuko continued.

"Shoot."

"When Senketsu awakens, why does he change into that sleazy, midriff-baring number?"

"Chalk that up to your father's tastes," Aikuro answered.

"Y-you're kidding!"

"I'd hate to think that, anyway," Aikuro grinned before continuing. "There's a lot I don't know about the Kamui, either. You'll have to find those answers yourself."

Ryuko's eyes lowered to the ground, her face completely neutral.

Akio watched her closely, his eyes softening at the sight of her. He felt bad just looking at her. Here she was, only seventeen years old, and she already had this world of problems dumped on her plate. She may have been strong, but she was still only a teenage girl. Hell, she hardly even had the chance to be a kid. And the icing on the cake was that somewhere out there, there is the person that

killed her father, and the only way she can find out who that is is if she takes down one of the strongest families in the world. Her father was the last family she had left, and what did he leave her? A sailor uniform and half of a scissor. Isshin Matoi was a good man, and Akio respected the hell out of him, but that seemed a little cold.

"Hey."

Ryuko looked up to Akio, raising an eyebrow in question.

"Your father left a message for you in that letter he sent us."

Aikuro furrowed his brow, glancing curiously at Akio out of the corner of his eye.

"What did he say?"

"He said that he loves you, and that he's sorry he couldn't give you a better life."

Ryuko nodded shakily, turning her head back down while biting her lower lip. She sat there silently for a few moments, lost in reflection, before she shot up from the couch and made a hasty exit towards their apartment door.

She placed a trembling hand on the door knob, but didn't move.

"... Thank you."

And with that, Ryuko pushed open the door and left the room, closing it silently on her way out.

The two brothers sat in silence, both staring at the door Ryuko had just left from.

"That was awfully kind of you, Akio."

"Yes, well. Given what she's been put through, and what she has yet to go through, I'd say she deserves a little love from her father."

"Hmmm."

Aikuro smiled and rose from his seat, walking over to his brother to tousle his hair.

"You're a good kid, Akio. I'm proud of you."

Akio grinned and removed the hand from his head. "Thanks, brother."

Author's Notes:

Awh! I decided to throw a little fluff your way at the end. And a little, dare I say... ROMANCE!? I don't know, I guess we'll have to see how the author continues going forwards. ͇_ (ツ)_ ͇

Next chapter we'll get to Junketsu. That should be a fun one. And then, one of my favorite episodes, Dawn of a Miserable Morning.

Thanks for reading guys!

Until next time!

Revelations

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the fifth chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

With this chapter, we finally take a step away from the canon storyline. Sort of. Akio gets to do his own thing, and we get to see him do some fighting of his own.

I had fun writing this chapter and mixing it up a little bit, so I hope you all enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

"This is our best chance, Akio. Kiryuin was seen leaving the Academy in a helicopter, and Gamagoori, Sanageyama, and Jakazure have already vacated the premises."

"Alright," Akio whispered into his phone as he stalked up to a wall of the Academy. "What about Inumuta?"

"He's still in there, presumably. Do you have the prototype I gave you?"

Akio smirked, raising his hands to examine his new gloves. They were similar to the glove that Ryuko wears, but were very, very different in their function. They were both colored a deep black, with red lines that traced across the back of his hands and to the knuckles, where steel edges were placed over each one.

"I do. I still can't believe you went through all that trouble to make these things for me."

"Well, considering the opponents we might be up against, you can't exactly go empty-handed. Do you remember how to activate them?"

Akio closed his right hand into a fist, pressing down on the buttons on his palm. In response, four razor sharp blades jutted out from above his knuckles.

Aikuro had been right, he couldn't exactly go into these fights with just his hands, so he had helped design these specifically for someone like Akio to use. All he needed to do was press down on the buttons, and the blades would shoot out.

His grin grew examining the blades, imagining the kind of damage he could deal with these. They were sharp and sturdy, perfect for Akio's fighting style.

"You really outdid yourself this time, Aikuro."

"Heh, I had a feeling you'd like those. Alright then, you know what to do. Good luck, Akio. Stay safe."

"Will do. Later."

Akio snapped his phone shut, then reached around to grab the backpack he was wearing. He pulled out a black ski mask and a bundle of rope attached to a grappling hook.

He'd have to be quick about this, since it was still daylight out. It would have been so much easier if he could have done this with the cover of night, but they just didn't have the time. Like Aikuro said, this was the perfect opportunity. This side of the Academy was often unmanned, and there were no windows on the wall he was preparing to scale. If he was quick about it, it wouldn't be a problem.

Making sure the mask was on correctly, he reached beside him and grabbed the rope in each of his hands. Swinging it in a circle a few times, he threw the rope above him, the hook latching on to the edge

of the Academy's roof. He tugged on it, satisfied that it could bear his weight.

And then he went to work.

It didn't take long to scale the side of the Academy. It was large, but this wasn't Akio's first rodeo.

He pulled himself onto the roof, then turned around and pulled on the rope to bring it up to him. He couldn't exactly leave it there, after all.

With the grappling hook back in his backpack, Akio glanced around the roof of the Academy. There was a door on the far end that led to a stairwell and the building itself. Surprisingly enough, there were no guards on the roof, either.

"Our president is really letting her guard down," Akio mumbled to himself as he made his way towards the stairwell.

First things first. He had to cut the power.

He raced down the stairwell, finding himself on the eighth and top floor of the Academy. He cracked the door to the floor open slowly, glancing down the corridor to make sure no one was guarding the area.

With the coast clear, Akio dashed down the hallway, stopping in front of a door that read 'maintenance.'

He pushed the door open, finding himself face to face with the circuit breakers to the whole Academy.

Akio grinned and opened it up, flipping off all of the switches. As soon as he had done so, the lights above him shut off, leaving him in darkness. It wasn't dark enough that he couldn't see, but it was still dark enough for him to not be detected given the fact that he was wearing all black.

"Hey! What happened to the power!?"

"I'm not sure. Why don't you go check the circuit box?"

"Why don't *you* go check it?"

"Damn it, Henry, can you just go check the damn thing? Is it that big of a deal?"

"Yeah, bite me."

Akio grimaced, hearing the sound of fast approaching footsteps coming his way. He slowly closed the door he had came through, then crouched down behind it, waiting for the guard to come in.

The door creaked open slowly, and in walked a lone One-Star student.

"God damn electricity," The One-Star grumbled as he walked over to the circuits. "I have no idea how any of this shit works."

Akio pounced out of the darkness, wrapping his elbow around the student's neck and locking him in a sleeper hold. The One-Star struggled against Akio's vice grip, but it was no use. He gurgled as the air left his lungs, eventually slumping against Akio, knocked out cold.

"Henry? Can you really not figure this shit out?"

Akio's eyes widened, darting towards the open door in front of him. He didn't expect the other guard to come check so soon.

"Henry?" The One-Star guard stepped into sight, his eyes widening at the scene before him. "What the-"

Akio dropped the body and sprung forwards, sending his fist into the man's windpipe.

"GUH!"

The guard stepped back, his hands on his throat as he struggled to breathe.

With the man dazed, Akio reached up and grabbed him by the head, slamming his knee into his skull.

The man recoiled and fell to the ground, completely unconscious.

"Phew," Akio exhaled slowly and wiped the sweat from his brow. That had been close. Too close.

He grabbed the guard by his legs and dragged him into the maintenance room, then shut the door behind him. That should prevent anyone from finding their unconscious bodies, at least for a little while. Unless they woke up, that is.

Akio sighed and walked crouched down back towards the stairwell. He still had a long, long way to go without getting seen. The sewing room was on the bottom floor, and he was only on the eighth.

Nearly an hour and several dimwitted guards later, Akio found himself on the bottom floor, standing outside the door that he knew led to the sewing club's headquarters.

His mission was one of reconnaissance. He and Aikuro both knew that the sewing club was in charge of creating the school's Goku uniforms, and that Shiro Iori was the president, but other than that they really didn't know much. The Academy was pretty secretive about what goes on behind the closed doors of the club. Only Satsuki, the Elite Four, the club members, and Shiro Iori really knew about it.

With the mother hen away, now was the perfect chance to gather some information.

Akio glanced around the corner, noticing two guards in front of the door he needed to go through. They both looked overly cautious, no

doubt because the lack of electricity throughout the entire building. There was no way that Akio could sneak his way past him.

This would be troublesome. However, he did have an idea.

"Help!" Akio shouted, altering his voice. "We have intruders! They got Henry!"

"They got Henry!?" One of the guards exclaimed.

"Shit, let's get out there!"

The two One-Stars rushed down the hallway, running towards the corner where Akio was hiding.

Akio reached into his pocket, grabbing the handful of needles used for anesthetic acupuncture.

The guards rushed out in front of him, their heads on a swivel.

"Where are they!?"

"Damn it, I can't see shit! It's too dark."

Akio flung out his hand, letting loose the handful of needles towards the One-Stars.

The needles embedded themselves into their backs, making them paralyzed.

"What!?"

"I-I can't move!"

The two guards fell to the ground with a thud, neither able to move an inch.

Akio stalked over to each downed man, delivering a quick kick to their heads. The men slumped against the ground, knocked out cold.

"Can't leave any evidence," Akio whispered to himself as he pulled the pins from their flesh and stuck them back into his pockets.

He rose from the bodies and walked to the door to the sewing club, slowly pushing it open.

It was as he expected. There were rows and rows of sewing machines, filling the room. A typical sewing room. However, what he didn't expect, was that the place was completely empty, and that the lights in the room were still running. The room must have had a backup generator.

He grabbed his phone from his pocket, opening it up and turning on the camera function. He took several pictures of the room, everything from its layout to the rows of sewing machines.

That should do it, Akio thought to himself. He got the information that he had came for, but something was still nagging at the back of his mind.

Where was everyone?

His phone vibrated in his hands, causing him to flinch. He glanced at the new message, seeing that it was from Aikuro.

Meet me in my room, now. Satsuki is back, and she has a Kamui. Ryuko's getting ready to engage her.

Akio's eyes widened reading the message. Satsuki? A Kamui? How was this possible? He thought that Dr. Matoi had only created one... yet his mansion HAD been raided. The Kiryuin clan must have gotten the necessary information to create a Kamui when they ransacked the place. Still, this was disconcerting to say the least.

Akio turned to walk back out of the sewing club when a soft voice caught his attention. He turned back around, his eyes traveling to a door to his left, where the voice seemed to be coming from. This might be his only chance to get some information on what they were

actually doing down here. He couldn't exactly pass this up. If he was quick about it, he'd be able to get what he came for and still make it back to Aikuro before anything serious happened.

He hugged the wall, slowly making his way towards the door.

"..whose weave is fifty percent Life Fibers."

Akio glanced around the corner. *FIFTY percent Life Fibers?*

The room was filled with several students in what looked to be hazmat suits, all huddled around a man who was chained down on a gurney. Several pieces of cloth covered his body, but they weren't connected.

"Commence sewing!" A voice called out, presumably the sewing club president himself.

The group of student's did as Shiro Iori told them, their hands darting all around the man's body as they sewed together the pieces of cloth.

"Number one button location confirmed!"

"Don't inhale the dust!"

"Commencing sleeve length alterations."

"Modifying side vent shape."

"Chest adjustment complete."

Akio gaped as the sewing students went to work. They were like engineers, their hands flying across the man's body like he was a machine they were tinkering with. It was almost... frightening, their level of efficiency. It made him sick to his stomach. This man they had on the gurney... he was just a tool to these people. An experiment.

"Activation of Life Fiber confirmed."

A flash of light emitted from the clothing they had stitched onto their subject, nearly the same as when Ryuko had transformed her Kamui.

The muscles of the man they were experimenting on bulged, doubling in growth. His thin body had expanded exponentially within seconds. He looked a lot like the Hulk from the comics that Akio had used to read.

The sewing club members were thrown away from the giant, flying into the walls around them. The man rose from the gurney, flinging it away as he roared.

"Crap! One-Star security! Fire all tranquilizer rounds!"

A line of One-Stars appeared, each holding a gun in their hands. They all let loose, firing their rounds at the monstrous man before them. He took them in stride and charged the students, knocking them away with a swipe of his arm.

Akio saw Inumuta place himself in between the giant and Iori, striking the man in the gut with his palm.

The man coughed, spitting up a pool of blood before the Life Fibers deactivated, reverting the test subject back to his original state.

"Thanks for the save, Inumuta," Akio heard Iori state.

"It was your decision to stop at the test-fitting stage," Inumuta replied as the body fell to the ground. "All I did was unravel those threads."

"Still, I'm not sure we could have beaten him if you hadn't been here," Iori sighed. "Simply by increasing the Life Fiber count to fifty percent, control is lost to this extent. It's hard to believe that some people are able to wear Kamui, which are entirely composed of Life Fibers."

"Indeed," Inumuta agreed. "Speaking of which, I must leave to meet up with Lady Satsuki and the others. Can you handle the clean up?"

"Of course," Iori replied. "Consider it done."

Akio retracted his head and hugged himself closer to the wall, scarcely letting out a breath until he heard Inumuta's footsteps disappear in the distance.

I can't believe it, Akio thought to himself. Fifty percent Life Fibers? What the hell are they -

"Three-Star Goku Uniform, Tailor's Regalia!"

Akio dropped to the ground right as a mechanical tentacle burst through the wall above him.

"I know you are there, intruder," Iori stated calmly as he walked towards the doorway. "You weren't exactly subtle. The electricity to the Academy doesn't just shut off out of nowhere."

Akio cursed under his breath and rolled forwards just as another mechanical tendril smacked into the floor he had just been standing on

Shiro Iori stalked towards him, a small grin gracing his lips. He wore a red robe with a black shirt underneath. His usual orange mask had turned into a gas mask, obscuring the lower half of his face. Four mechanic tendrils snaked out from behind him, with sharp metal claws at the end of each one.

It looked like he wasn't getting out of here without a fight.

"It's time to see what's behind that mask of yours. I may not be much of a fighter, but I'm more than enough to handle the likes of you."

Iori's four tendrils darted forwards, racing towards Akio.

Akio ducked and dodged the first three, then grabbed the last one underneath his armpit. Latching on with both hands, Akio heaved with all of his strength to his left, throwing lori into a nearby sewing machine.

"Oof!"

lori slammed against the machine, his body draping over it. He recovered quickly, picking himself up off of the machine and sending his mechanic tentacles back towards Akio.

Akio pressed on the buttons on the palms of his gloves, releasing the blades on his knuckles. He swung out at the first one, slashing through its metal and rendering it useless.

The other three still raced towards him, forcing him jump away from their hits. Two of the tendrils smacked into the ground, but the final one struck true, slashing Akio across the face.

"Ngh!"

The metal claws of lori's mechanic tentacle scratched against his face, tearing through his ski mask and cutting his skin underneath. Three deep gashes traced across the right side of his face, going from his eyebrow to the bottom of his cheek. Thankfully, the metal hadn't pierced his eye.

Blood pooled into his right eye, effectively blinding him. He could feel the red liquid gush down his face, trickling down his neck and down his shirt. It was an unsettling feeling, to say the least.

Akio barely had time to recover has another tendril flew towards him.

He swung his right arm forwards. He felt the blades on his fist connect with lori's tentacle, cutting straight through the metal and tearing it apart down the middle. Now he only had two left.

"Hmmm," lori hummed and retracted his destroyed tentacle. "That's interesting weaponry you have there. Those blades are even sharp enough to cut through my Tailor's Regalia."

Akio didn't reply, afraid that if he did lori might recognize his voice somehow.

Taking the initiative, Akio ran forwards, his arms trailing behind him and ready to spring forwards at any given second.

lori sent both of his remaining tendrils forwards, directly towards Akio's chest.

He dodged the two, but at the last second one of the tendrils changed its course, connecting with Akio's left shoulder.

"Gah!"

He could feel the first few inches of the tendril's metal claws dig into his shoulder, embedding themselves into his flesh.

Akio grit his teeth, fighting off the unbelievable pain. His shoulder felt like it had been lit on fire, and he couldn't get any feeling out of his arm. This would definitely make things more difficult.

He grabbed onto the mechanical arm that was buried into his shoulder and pulled it out, but kept his grip firm on the tentacle.

Ignoring the pain, he tugged hard on the tentacle, dragging lori towards him.

"Wha-!"

As lori flew towards him, Akio swung with his right arm, his closed fist connecting with the side of lori's face.

"Oof!"

Iori fell to the ground, his body going slack as he lost consciousness. Had he struck him with his blades, he'd no doubt be dead. But Akio wasn't a killer. Satsuki's henchman or not, he refused to take another's life.

"Haah... haah..."

Akio panted, taking several moments to catch his breath. He could no longer move his left arm, and the right side of his face burned terribly.

With his adrenaline wearing thin, he could feel himself growing weak and dizzy. He brought his hand up to the wound on his shoulder, rubbing the torn flesh gingerly. He pulled away, examining his hand. It was coated in blood.

He had to hurry.

Gritting his teeth and pressing his hand against his shoulder to slow the bleeding, he hobbled out of the sewing club. Aikuro's room was on the third floor, so he had a ways to go before he got there.

Akio limped down the hallway, eventually making it to the stairwell. He had four flights to go.

He carefully climbed up the stairs, willing his weakened legs to climb up each step. Each stair seemed like a mountain, each step a trial of his strength, his willpower.

Akio repeated that line like a mantra, giving himself the strength to continue onward. If he failed here, he was as good as dead. He had so much more to do. So much more to see. He couldn't fall here.

The seconds ticked away like hours, and before he knew it he found himself on the fourth floor of the Academy. He couldn't even remember how he had got there.

He pushed himself forwards, struggling to keep standing. All he had to do was make one more right, and then he would be right in front of Aikuro's class room.

Akio rounded the corner, keeping himself upright by placing his free hand on the wall. He could feel the blood seep through his shirt and hoodie, the soaked clothing sticking to his skin. It was an unsettling sensation.

He stumbled through the doorway, his blurry vision spotting Aikuro standing in front of the windows.

"A-Aikuro..."

"Hmm?" Aikuro turned away from the window, his eyes widening underneath his glasses when he caught sight of Akio. "Akio! What the hell happened!?"

"F-fight," Akio breathed. "S-sewing club. L-life Fibers..."

Akio fell forwards, smacking against one of the empty desks before he hit the ground.

"Akio!"

His brother's voice was the last thing he heard before the darkness enveloped him.

...

"... Where am I?"

Akio glanced around, but all he could see was white in every direction. It went on for miles, with no end in sight. There was no sign of anything else, nor anyone else.

He was alone. Utterly, hopelessly alone.

"Akio..."

Akio spun around at the sound of his name, but there was nothing. He could have sworn...

"Akio..."

He swiveled back around, but still, there was nothing.

"Quit it!" He cried into the nothingness. "Show yourself!"

"Akio..."

He turned around once more, coming face to face with his brother.

"Aikuro?"

Aikuro smiled and took off his glasses, revealing his bright blue eyes.

"Hey there, little brother," Aikuro laughed and tousled his hair. "I'm proud of you."

Akio smiled and removed the hand from his head. "Thank-"

A blade erupted from the center Aikuro's chest, splattering Akio's face with blood.

Akio stared dumbly at the sword in front of him, slowly bringing a trembling hand up to his face, swiping across it.

There was no blood. There was nothing. He felt it hit him. He could still feel it.

"AIKURO!"

His brother's body disappeared, leaving Akio standing alone once again.

"Akio! Help me!"

Akio turned on his heel, seeing a tied up Mako standing off in the distance.

"Mako!"

Akio raced forwards, his hands outstretched to grab her.

It was too late.

A different blade punched through Mako's chest, sending a fountain of blood pouring out of her and covering Akio.

"MAKO!" Akio cried

But she was already gone. He was alone. Again.

Akio collapsed to the ground, burying his face in his hands. He tried to cry, but nothing came out. He sobbed, but no tears came. He could feel the cries leave his throat, but there was no sound. Only silence.

"Akio..."

Akio jumped up off the ground, spinning around to face the new voice.

Ryuko was sprawled out on the ground, her skin covered in gashes and bruises. Her Senketsu was torn to shreds, completely destroyed.

"H-help me," Ryuko whimpered. "They were... too strong... I couldn't... do it..."

Ryuko crawled towards the motionless Akio, the occasional groan or whimper escaping her lips.

"Akio... help me..."

A blade plunged downwards, punching through her back and into the floor.

"NO!"

Akio shot upwards, immediately regretting it.

"Gah!"

He grabbed at his shoulder, feeling an incredible amount of pain shoot up and down the left side of his chest.

He clenched his eyes shut and pressed a hand to his face, trying to fight off the dizziness. He regretted that, too. His face burned like it had been doused in boiling hot water. The pain itself nearly caused him to lose consciousness again.

"Hey! Mr. Mankanshoku! He's awake!"

Akio peeked one eye open, examining his surroundings.

He was in a simple room, the walls and floor made from wood. In the corner of the room was a single dresser, but other than that the room was completely barren. He looked down at his bare chest, noticing the wrapping around his left shoulder for the first time. The white wrapping was slightly tinted red, but not too bad. Whoever had patched him up knew what they were doing.

His gaze shifted from himself and to the other presence in the room.

"And I thought I was beat up," Ryuko scoffed.

Akio gaped at the still alive Ryuko, looking her up and down. She had changed out of her Kamui, and instead was wearing a pair of orange pajamas that was decorated with various bunny faces. It didn't seem to fit well, considering her top barely came down past her belly button.

His eyes traveled to the center of her chest, feeling immense relief in the fact that there was no gaping wound there.

It was just a dream.

"Hey. My eyes are up here, fucker."

Akio met her eyes briefly then looked away, his breath still coming in short gasps. He could feel his heart hammering against his chest, threatening to burst from its cage.

That dream was so vivid. It felt so *real*. He could still feel the blood on his skin...

"W-where," Akio swallowed, wetting his throat. "Where am I?"

"At the Mankanshoku's," Ryuko replied slowly. She watched him closely, concern shadowing her face. "Are you alright? You're shaking."

Akio brought a hand up and wiped his forehead. It was drenched in sweat.

He closed his eyes and took deep breaths, hoping to will himself to calm down.

"Back-alley doctor coming through!"

The door to the room slid open and in came Mr. Mankanshoku, wearing a white lab coat and carrying a duffel bag with a red cross on it.

He plopped down next to Akio, opening his bag and pulling out a syringe.

"This'll make you feel better in no time," Mr. Mankanshoku grinned and pushed the needle into his arm, pressing down on the plunger.

"Thank you," Akio replied weakly. He was right. Akio could almost feel all of his pain begin to fade away.

He looked around one more time before his eyes settled on the doctor. "What happened?"

"You passed out from blood loss," Mr. Mankanshoku answered, surprisingly serious. "The wound to your shoulder was pretty deep, but I was able to patch it up. Luckily, it was just a flesh wound and nothing important was damaged."

Akio nodded dumbly and reached a hand up, gingerly rubbing his fingers across the three gashes that ran down the right side of his face.

"Hey!" Ryuko slapped at Akio's hand. "Don't touch those."

"She's right," Mr. Mankanshoku agreed. "I wasn't able to close those up, so we'll have to let them heal naturally. It'll leave a nasty scar, but hey, women like scars."

Akio blinked. It was almost too much to take in. But more importantly, was this what Dr. Mankanshoku was like? He seemed so... serious, so professional.

"Hey, you're awake."

Akio looked up to the new voice in the room.

"Aikuro," Akio exhaled in relief.

Aikuro stood in the doorway, his shoulder leaning against it. He was still wearing his usual teacher persona, his regular sunglasses covering his eyes. His white button up hung loosely off his shoulders and his tie was tied lazily around his neck.

"In the flesh," Aikuro smiled.

Mako and Mrs. Mankanshoku burst into the room, clamoring around Akio.

"Oh dear, you're sweating," Mrs. Mankanshoku said and placed a damp washcloth on Akio's head. "And you're shaking like a leaf."

Akio sighed in relief, basking in the coolness of the cloth. It felt unbelievable against his burning skin.

"Akio, Akio, Akio!" Mako exclaimed and grabbed Akio by his good arm, tugging on it. "We thought you had kicked the bucket! What happened to you?"

"Nothing," Akio mumbled, making eye contact with Aikuro. "I ran into some trouble, is all."

Aikuro's brow furrowed and he stepped into the room fully.

"Do you all mind if I have a moment of privacy with Akio here?"

The family and Ryuko shared a look and shrugged, then rose from the ground. They left the room, leaving Aikuro and Akio alone.

Aikuro stepped closer, getting down on his haunches beside him.

"So, what happened?"

"I ran into the sewing club president," Akio mumbled. "He's stronger than he looks."

"What?" Aikuro hissed. "What were you thinking, taking him on alone? Why didn't you just leave?"

"Because," Akio replied flatly. "They were doing uniform tests with *fifty* percent Life Fibers."

"Fifty!?" Aikuro gasped.

"Yeah. It didn't go well, either. Their test subject couldn't control the power and they had to put him down."

"I'm not surprised. Thirty percent is a stretch itself, but fifty? They're growing bold."

"Indeed," Akio coughed, wincing as the pain flared in his shoulder. "I have pictures of the place on my phone, if you can find it."

Aikuro nodded and held up Akio's phone. "I saw."

"Good," Akio said, his eyes drifting to the door that Ryuko had left. "So, how did she do? Against Kiryuin."

"Very well, actually. I think she caught our class president off guard."

"Really?" Akio quirked an eyebrow. "That's amazing."

"Indeed. It still troubles me that she somehow got herself a Kamui, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Aikuro's face fell, his eyebrows knitting in concern. "Are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah, I think so. Mr. Mankanshoku is more skilled than he looks."

"Good," Aikuro exhaled slowly. "Try and be more careful next time, alright? You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Akio smirked and nodded. "I'll try."

The door slammed open, and in walked Mr. Mankanshoku, his family with Ryuko in tow.

"Alright! Enough chit-chat. He needs his rest."

"Sure thing, doctor," Aikuro replied, going back to his teacher persona.

Akio nodded and tried to stand, but Mr. Mankanshoku placed a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back down.

"Oh, no you don't."

Akio blinked. "Huh?"

"You're not going anywhere, dear," Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled sweetly at him. "Unless you don't mind bleeding out on the walk home."

"I-I don't know. I couldn't possibly put you out any more than I have already."

"Oh, nonsense," Mr. Mankanshoku waved him off. "We're happy to help. You're a family friend, after all."

Akio looked over to Mako, who was nodding enthusiastically with her mother's statement. Mataro and his father grinned and nodded as well.

"Well, if you say so."

Aikuro smiled, then turned and walked out of the door, raising a hand in farewell.

"I'll see you in class tomorrow, Akio," Aikuro called out as he left. "Make sure you aren't late."

Akio watched as Aikuro left, then sighed and slowly ran a hand through his hair. What a fucking day.

He blinked, becoming fast aware of the five sets of eyes trained on him. Six if you counted Guts.

"Uh," Akio turned to the others, smiling gratefully. "Thanks again for all of your help today. I don't know where I'd be right now if it weren't for you guys."

"Probably dead."

Mrs. Mankanshoku grinned and slapped her son in the back of his head.

"OW!"

"Please, Akio, don't you worry about a thing. We're happy to help."

Akio grinned, feeling his spirits lift at the kindness of the Mankanshokus. Plus, whatever Mr. Mankanshoku had given him had him feeling rather giddy and surprisingly happy. Even better, he could barely feeling any pain coming from his shoulder or face. Come to think of it, he could barely even feel anything in his extremities.

He decided it was probably best not to ask the doctor about it.

"We've already had dinner, but there are some leftovers still on the table. You should make sure to eat something before you go to bed."

Akio nodded, his eyes drifting towards where their dining room was. Now that she mentioned it, he really was feeling famished.

"Okay!" Mr. Mankanshoku exclaimed and jumped up, running around the room as he got ready for bed. "Bedtime! Bedtime! Bedtime!"

"Yes, let's Dad!"

The father-son duo ran in circles around the room, doing everything from brushing their teeth, cleaning themselves, undressing and putting on pajamas, then grabbing the sleeping mats in the corner and flinging them on the ground.

"Goodnight!"

The two threw themselves onto their beds, falling asleep near instantaneously.

"Good lord," Akio mumbled. He'd be lying if he didn't wish he could fall asleep that quickly.

"You really should get something to eat, Akio."

Akio glanced at Mrs. Mankanshoku, who was giving him a very pointed, very stern look.

"Of course," Akio replied. "Thanks again, Mrs. Mankanshoku."

"Do you need some help getting up?" Ryuko asked, already moving to do so.

"I'll be fine."

He picked himself up from the ground, stumbling a bit, but still able to stay standing on his own two feet. He walked into the Mankanshoku dining room, carefully taking a seat down in front of the table. Staring at its contents, Akio slowly reached out and grabbed a few croquettes.

Akio took a few nibbles of the fried good, his eyes glossing over as he listened to the sounds of the quiet home. The floorboards creaked every once and awhile, and a cricket could be heard playing its tune from outside. The occasional snore tore through the silence, making Akio grin a little. He assumed the Mankanshokus would be snorers.

Now that he was alone, his mind inevitably drifted off towards more dark and depressing things. Painkillers or not, that nightmare still freaked him out. But the three were still breathing. They were still alive.

It was just a dream. They happen. It wasn't the end of the world.

"But... it just... felt so real..." Akio whispered to himself.

"What did?"

Akio snapped his head up as Ryuko and Mako walked into the dining room, both sitting down across from him and taking a few croquettes in their hands.

Ryuko watched him curiously, while Mako smiled brightly at him, shoveling croquettes into her mouth.

"Nothing," Akio replied and took a bite of his food. "You two really don't have to stay up with me while I eat, you know."

"Are you kidding?" Mako stared wide eyed at him. "This is just like a slumber party! We're all wearing PJs, eating junk food, and having late night talks! There's no way I'm going to miss out on this."

Akio snorted, wincing slightly as the wound on his shoulder stung.

"I've actually never spent the night over at a friend's house," Akio remarked absently, staring at the croquette in his hand.

"Other than the few nights I've stayed here, neither have I," Ryuko replied, taking a bite of her food.

"A night for firsts!" Mako giggled, clapping her hands excitedly. "You two get your first sleep over, I get to host my first one, and Akio got stabbed!"

"Uh... I don't think that last one should be counted, Mako."

"But, you're not living life to its fullest if you don't experience everything at least once."

"Even a stabbing?"

"That is an experience, isn't it?"

"I mean... I guess so."

"So it counts!"

Akio smiled listening to the two, taking another bite of his croquette. It definitely had been an experience.

Author's Notes

And there you have it! I thought about cutting it off when Akio lost consciousness, but I decided I didn't want to put it off till the next chapter. I really want to get to the next episode, and besides, you can never have enough Ryuko and Mako.

Oh, and if you're wondering why sometimes when Akio punched and he didn't have his blades out, it's because he has to actually press down on the buttons for them to shoot out. After all, you don't want to have to deal a killing blow every time you punch a dude in the face.

Next chapter we'll get to the Dawn of a Miserable Morning. That one will probably be pretty lighthearted, considering the episode.

Thanks for reading everyone! I really appreciate all of the support so far!

Until next time!

Race to the Finish!

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the sixth chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Sorry for the longer wait on this one. It actually took a lot longer to write than I thought.

This chapter will definitely be the most goofy of all of the chapters of this story, and for good reason. This episode is pretty silly, after all. This chapter will also be pretty long, compared to the other five. I really, REALLY, didn't want to split this chapter into two. It just wouldn't be that good as a two parter.

A quick side note. Akio will be pretty OOC for 2/3 of this chapter. You'll see why.

And with that out of the way, let's get on with the show!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

"Senketsu!"

"What!?"

Akio jumped out of his sleeping bag, hopping to his feet and keeping his head on a swivel.

His eyes darted around the room, finally landing on Ryuko, who was sitting straight up with wide eyes.

"What's wrong!?"

Akio grimaced and gently rubbed his wounded shoulder. The painkillers had definitely worn off. Excellent.

"Ow..."

"Oh," Ryuko blinked and shook her head. "It's nothing. Just a dream. Sorry."

"I-it's fine," Akio winced and pressed his hand a little harder into his wound, feeling a tiny bit of relief in the pressure. "I had to go to the bathroom anyways."

Which was partly true. Granted, he probably could have slept a few more hours had he hadn't been woken up, but he was definitely awake now. No point in trying to get back to sleep.

He slowly walked through the Mankanshoku household, carefully avoiding any sleeping body as he made his way to their bathroom.

Eventually making it into the tiny room, he stopped in front of the bathroom sink, examining his reflection in the mirror.

"Damn..."

He brought a hand up, slowly rubbing his fingers across the gashes across the right side of his face. They were pretty bad. Each cut was fairly deep, and had already scabbed over. They'd definitely leave a nasty scar, but at least Iori missed the eye.

"Well, there goes my complexion," Akio remarked dryly.

His bathroom break was interrupted when the sound of sirens began blasting through the slums, shattering the early morning silence.

"What the-"

Akio's face fell, immediately remembering what day it was.

It was No-Late Day.

What a terrible, terrible day it was.

"Senketsu!"

Shit!

Akio burst through the bathroom door, his eyes flying every which way.

"What's wr-OW."

Akio sighed and gingerly rubbed his shoulder. Of course nothing was wrong. Senketsu was just getting a wash.

"Ah, Akio," Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled up at him as she cleaned Ryuko's outfit. "Good morning! You should grab some breakfast before you head out. You need the food after yesterday."

"And don't forget this!"

Mr. Mankanshoku slid up next to him, stabbing two syringes into his arm and pushing down on the plungers.

Akio watched wide eyed as the *two* syringes full of some mystery drug was pushed into his body. There was no going back now.

"Uh..." Akio gulped. "What exactly are you giving me?"

"Morphine. It should take all of your pain away in no time," Mr. Mankanshoku replied, nodding sagely.

"M-morphine?" Akio stammered and ran a hand through his hair. "And why did you give me two?"

"You'll be gone at school all day, so it seemed like the logical solution."

Ryuko snorted. "Good. If he's stoned on painkillers maybe he'll loosen up a little bit."

"I'm plenty loose, thank you very much."

Ryuko turned to him and quirked an eyebrow, a smirk growing on her lips.

"Excuse me? What was that?"

"Can it, Matoi," Akio growled.

"See? Right there. Case in point. It's Ryuko. *Ryuko* . You sound like bushy brows when you call me Matoi."

"Fine, *Ryuko*," Akio said and rolled his eyes. "Shouldn't you be worrying more about Senketsu than what I call you?"

"Hmmm?"

Ryuko glanced over to her right, seeing Mrs. Mankanshoku wringing the water out of Senketsu rather forcefully.

"Senketsu!" Ryuko cried and dashed to him.

Akio snickered and walked back into the room he had been sleeping in, carefully avoiding Mako as she bolted around getting ready for school. He felt a little strange knowing that he had just been pumped full of opiates, but he was confident enough that he'd be alright. They're just painkillers. What's the worst that could happen?

"Morning, Akio!"

"Morning, Mako."

Akio found his backpack in the corner of the room and opened it up, pulling out a certain magazine.

"Mataro!" Akio shouted as he stood. "Croquette me!"

"On it, boss!"

Akio reached up and grabbed the flying croquette without looking and stuffed the fried good in his mouth.

"Good man," Akio said and turned to toss him the Playboy. "Go nuts."

Mataro snatched the magazine out of the air and immediately ran into the bathroom, locking the door on his way in.

Akio pretended he didn't notice and moved to go back into the living room, stopping when he spotted a pile of clothes in the corner.

He frowned and picked up his black hoodie, his eyes immediately going to the large rip in its shoulder. The large, red blood stain could even be seen against the deep black of the hoodie. It was a chilling sight, to say the least.

"Don't worry, Akio. I'll stitch that right up and clean it for you."

Akio flinched and turned around to see Mrs. Mankanshoku smiling sweetly at him.

"T-that's okay, ma'am," Akio said and tossed the hoodie back on to the pile of clothes. "You can just throw these out. I don't want them anymore."

"If you say so, but at least take something of my husband's to wear to school. I doubt you want to go the whole day shirtless."

Akio smiled and nodded. "I really would appreciate it."

"Here you go, Akio!"

Mako flew back into the room, shoving a very large, very Hawaiian, shirt into his hands.

"You can have that one," Mako grinned. "Dad doesn't wear it anymore."

"Uh..."

No wonder he didn't wear it anymore.

Akio's face paled examining the atrocity. It'd be one thing if it was too big on him, but it was also Hawaiian. *Hawaiian*. There were so many contradicting colors thrown on to one poor shirt, that it hurt his eyes to look at. There was some blue, some yellow, green, orange, basically the entire rainbow. The exact opposite kind of shirt that Akio would ever want to wear.

Beggars can't be choosers.

"Thanks," Akio replied as earnestly as he could and put on the shirt. As expected, it was humongous on him. It draped so loosely over his shoulders that it was hard telling if he was even wearing a shirt at all. The fabric barely touched his skin.

"Looking good, man."

Akio glanced to his right, seeing Ryuko grinning devilishly at him.

He flushed and turned away, mumbling curses under his breath.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Mrs. Mankanshoku exclaimed and hurried back over to Senketsu, throwing him down on an ironing board.

Akio followed close behind, watching curiously as Mrs. Mankanshoku went to work.

"Now you three get a move on," The housewife told them as she placed a steaming hot iron down on Senketsu's... face? Did it have a face? It sure looked like it did.

... Was it... blushing? Can clothing do that?

"We'll drop your uniform off later," Mr. Mankanshoku assured. "Don't worry about a thing."

"And you make sure to come back after school ends," Mrs. Mankanshoku told Akio. "Bazaro will need to change the dressings on your wounds."

"Sure thing. And thanks again, I really do-"

"Alright!" Mako interrupted as she flew onto the scene. "Time to go! We can't be late! Ryuko really needs to make some more friends if she's naming her clothes now!"

"Hey!" Ryuko replied indignantly. "I do not-"

Mako grabbed Ryuko and Akio by the arm, kicking the door open and bolting through it. She ran at an unbelievable speed, all the while carrying two teenagers.

"How are you so strong!?" Ryuko cried as Mako flew down the stairwell next to her house.

"PLEASE DON'T PULL ON THE ARM!"

Mako reached the bottom of the stairwell, where a river of students were waiting on them.

Akio's eyes widened at the sea of students, immediately aware of Mako's hand tightening around his arm.

"Mako, please don't throw me, I beg of you, please-"

Akio's words died in his throat as he felt himself get flung through the air, twirling head over heel.

He hit the herd with a splash, his arms swinging around frantically as he tried to grasp for a hand hold. Just as he thought the crowd was going to suck him in, he felt a hand grab on to his and pull him up onto a certain silver guitar case.

"Oh, thank God," Akio breathed. He was draped over Ryuko's guitar case next to Mako, while Ryuko herself sat atop of the case,

watching the giant crowd in awe.

"What's with this mass migration?"

"It's because-"

Akio stopped completely, his eyes narrowing.

Ryuko turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Because...?"

Akio blinked and shook his head. He glanced around, continuing his excessive blinking.

"Heh," Akio giggled and shook his head as if that would stave off the euphoria building in his chest. "I think the painkillers are starting to kick in."

"Great," Ryuko sighed and rolled her eyes, trying to ignore Akio's persistent giggling. "So what's the deal with this crowd, Mako?"

"There is a day when all of Honnouji Academy's No Stars put their entire youth on the line when they go to school," Mako explained. "That day has dawned! Today is that day! This is No-Late Day!"

"... Huh?"

"I wouldn't worry about it too much, toots," Akio replied and pulled himself fully onto the silver case. "It's not too bad. I just hope they don't have that barrel of monkeys like they did last year. Those shitters nearly ate me alive."

"Monkeys? A barrel? What the hell are you even talking about?"

As if some divine entity was answering her call, the houses of the No Star district were completely pushed aside and off of their foundations as a gigantic boat plowed through the district.

"Hahahaha!"

Ira Gamagoori looked down at Ryuko from his perch on his boat, grinning victoriously.

"I see you are confused, Ryuko Matoi."

"Oh. It's you. That Elite Four jerk."

"Disciplinary Committee Chair and one of Honnouji Academy's Elite Four, Ira Gamagoori!"

"I feel like we knew that already," Akio mumbled, placing his chin in his hand.

"Allow me to explain!" Gamagoori continued. "No-Late Day is a school event that comes once a semester, in which the Disciplinary Committee springs surprises on slacker No Star students to whip them into shape!"

Akio tuned the explanation out. He had heard it before. He didn't need a repeat performance.

Besides, a butterfly that fluttered past his field of vision was more interesting anyways. Butterflies were such interesting creatures. Out of all the insects, Akio had to think that they were the neatest. They had such colorful wings... and that was about it. Their name was fun too. Butter. Flies. Butterflies. Who came up with that name? Someone that loved butter, and had an appreciation for flies? Or was it the other way around? Was it a person with the last name of Butterflies? What did butter have to do with flies, anyways? They didn't have any buttery characteristics to them at all. In fact, if Akio was being totally honest, flies were near the exact opposite of butter. It just didn't add up. Something was off.

"WHAT THE HELL!?"

Gamagoori's booming voice broke Akio from his revolutionary thoughts.

"What manner of slacker outfits are these?" Gamagoori cried, pointing at both Ryuko and Akio. "It is a mortal insult to Honnouji Academy and Lady Satsuki that you two would dress in such a manner!"

Ryuko blushed, covering herself with her arms as if that would lessen the embarrassment.

"My Kamui is in the laundry! It'll be dropped off soon!"

Akio, on the other hand, was much more relaxed with his reaction.

"Huh?"

He glanced down at his outfit. Sure, the Hawaiian shirt wasn't the most attractive shirt on the planet, but it was growing on him. The colors were pretty.

He wouldn't stand for it. No one dissed on his outfit.

"Sorry, Disciplinary Chair, this was the only outfit in your mother's closet this morning," Akio said with a shrug. "I must admit, she has nice taste."

The veins on Gamagoori's forehead bulged, his grinding teeth clearly audible over the snickering of Ryuko and the other No Stars.

"Takahiro! For such an offense, that will be-"

"Is it a mortal insult, though?"

Gamagoori flinched at Mako's voice, as somehow she had managed to materialize right beside him.

"Ryuko was asleep until just now. It's perfectly normal for sleeping people to be wearing pajamas."

Gamagoori stared slack-jawed at Mako, his eyes darting back and forth between her and where she had once been.

"No one can laugh at that!" Mako continued. "Or do you mean to say that you dress like that when YOU sleep, Gamagoori?"

Ryuko and the rest of the No Stars watched on lazily, while Akio watched on attentively. He had to admit, Mako was making a good point. Maybe he should get a nice pair of PJs.

"No, I sleep in the nude."

"I knew it!" Akio threw his head back and laughed. "I fucking knew it!"

Mako gasped. "Gamagoori! You'll catch a cold if you sleep in the buff! If you were sick, could you work to your full potential in an emergency?"

"Oh. I guess not."

"Please wear pajamas like everyone else when you sleep!"

"Hmmm," The disciplinary chair narrowed his eyes at the sprightly girl. "What is your name?"

"Second year class K, Mako Mankanshoku! The pattern on my favorite pajamas is Mt. Fuji, two hawks, and three eggplants."

Akio couldn't help but wonder what the hell that would look like. A mountain with three eggplants on it, with two hawks flying through the air? Or would it be the other way around, with the eggplants flying and the hawks on the mountain. It was a mystery for the ages. He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even notice that Mako mentioned nothing about his Hawaiian shirt.

"Mankanshoku, you say? I'll remember that."

Gamagoori turned to Ryuko and Akio. "Matoi! I couldn't care less what you happen to be wearing right now! But do you really think you

can reach the school without your Kamui?"

Gamagoori grinned and pulled out a remote control, pressing down on a button. In response, the houses of Honnou City moved from their foundations, making way for what looked like a giant system of roads that led to the Academy. The roads, of course, appeared to be lined with different types of booby traps and pitfalls. Akio took great comfort in the fact that there were no monkeys that he could see.

Mako suddenly appeared beside the two, her expression frantic as she looked over the track they would have to take to get to the Academy.

"There's only three hours to go until our first class," Mako said, biting her nails. "We should get a move on! Chop, chop!"

Ryuko blinked before her expression turned competitive, a smirk growing on her lips.

"Heh, the people at this school sure love to-"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Akio rolled his eyes, pushing Ryuko and Mako towards the stairs that led to the long path they had to take. "We get it. We understand. You're going to show them who the real boss is! Like we haven't heard that before. But, get this, how about we show them who's boss while we get a move on? Crazy right? I know, that's probably hard for you to understand, but let's try it out."

"Hmph!" Ryuko huffed, smacking Akio's hands away. "Even when you're doped up on painkillers, you're still a smart-ass! Even more so."

"The smart-ass that's going to save your pajama'd ass," Akio replied hotly.

No sooner had he replied than the crowd of students rushed towards the three and the stairs behind them.

"Oh, shit! Hustle, hustle!"

Akio led the girls up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He could hear the rumble of the students behind him, but he did his best to keep them out of his mind.

They had nearly made it to the top when the stairs collapsed, essentially turning it into one big slide.

Damn it!

Akio pressed down on the buttons on his gloves, releasing the blades above his knuckles. He punched into the steel slide, stopping himself from falling.

Looking beneath him, it appeared Ryuko had the same idea, her blade pushed into the steel to keep herself and Mako from falling.

Ryuko tossed Mako up, shortly followed by herself, leaving Akio hanging there alone.

"Oh, sure. Leave the crippled guy," Akio grumbled, slowly climbing up the slide with his clawed gloves.

Akio pulled himself up over the ledge, his struggle ignored by Mako and Ryuko.

"There's nine hundred and ninety-nine to go," Mako pointed to the scoreboard that showed their progress, scratching at her head.

"That's more than usual, I think."

"He's screwing with us," Ryuko growled. "Come on, Mako!"

"No, don't worry about me," Akio mumbled as he stood, dusting himself off. "I'm totally fine, thanks for the concern though."

The two seemingly ignored his complaints, turning to walk forward when a student bumped into Ryuko. The girl was dressed in the

usual Academy girl's outfit, but had a bandaged arm that was supported by another bandage that looped around her neck.

"Ow, that hurts so much!" She cried as she fell to the ground, grasping at her injured arm.

Mako gasped and rushed to the girl's side.

"Oh! You're in our class, Maiko Ogure!"

Akio tilted his head to the side, examining the girl closely. She was? She didn't look that familiar to him.

"Are you okay!?" Ryuko shouted as she skidded up next to her. "Your arm, is it hurt?"

"Oh, yeah," Akio grumbled as he walked up to the trio, glaring at Ryuko. "Arm injuries are a bitch, aren't they?"

Ryuko ignored Akio's comment, keeping her eyes glued at the newcomer.

"Why, it's Mankanshoku and Takahiro," Maiko said, picking herself off the ground. "And you're Matoi, the transfer student?"

Maiko looked away, grabbing at her arm. "Yes, I hurt my arm in that trap just now. But I'll live."

Akio rose an eyebrow at that. Just now? How did she get it bandaged so quickly? Did no one notice this tidbit of information?

Maiko latched onto Akio's good arm, using him as support as she struggled to stand. The way she moved... it almost seemed... over exaggerated?

"I can't give up over something like this!" Maiko cried.

"Careful now," Akio replied, putting a hand on her to keep her steady.

"Hey guys," Mako began, looking between Akio and Ryuko. "Since Maiko's hurt, let's take her to school with us."

"No! I can't let you! I'd only slow you down!"

Now Akio knew something was up. Mako was offering this girl a free ticket and she was complaining? Even knowing that if she failed, she'd be screwed? He'd like to believe that she was being honest, but he knew better. After attending the school for nearly two years, he knew exactly how cutthroat it could be. No one would pass up on an offer like this.

"Oh, okay," Ryuko replied and turned away. "We'll go on ahead then. Don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

Akio grinned and moved to walk away, stopping when Maiko's grip tightened around his arm.

"Oh, oh the pain!" Maiko cried. "Hang in there, Maiko. If anyone can make it on her own, it's you!"

"Really?" Akio said. "What is this, a soap opera?"

Mako bit at her nails, glancing anxiously at the three.

"Ryuko, Akio, we have to help her!"

"For crying out loud," Ryuko scoffed and smirked at Maiko. "Putting on a brave act, eh?"

"This whole thing is an act," Akio mumbled under his breath.

He knew where this was going. It was clear as day. Ryuko and Mako would offer to help her, then Ryuko would be hamstrung into carrying her essentially the whole way. And then there was the fact that Maiko was clearly up to something. First off, her story just didn't make any sense. Second, Akio didn't even recognize her. Finally, there was the fact that she was clearly overacting her movements. It was sketchy.

Akio might have been doped up on painkillers, but he wasn't dense.

"Fine," Akio said and knelt down in front of Maiko. "Hop on."

Maiko did so without question, hopping on to Akio's back piggyback style.

"Are you sure you can do that?" Ryuko asked, eyeing him worriedly.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Akio responded, biting back a sarcastic response. "Besides, I'm the one with the bum arm. It makes sense that I be the one to carry her."

"Thanks, Takahiro," Maiko replied, unsure on where to put her arms and settling for draping them around his torso. "I really do appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah, let's just get a move on. I don't plan on getting expelled just yet."

The group nodded and moved forwards, not making it very far when they had to stop because of a gigantic loop in the road.

"Wow," Maiko breathed. "How can we get past that?"

"Easy," Akio replied. "They did the same thing last year. We just use the spikes on the side of it to climb passed it."

The three girls nodded and Ryuko and Mako began forwards, using the spikes as hand holds as they slowly climbed up the loop in the road.

"Are you sure you can do this with me on your back, Takahiro?"

"It'll be fine. Just hold on tight."

He could feel Maiko nod against his back, hugging herself tighter to him.

Unlike the girls, Akio had a rather convenient method of keeping his grip on the spikes. He pressed down on his palm, releasing his blades to help him climb. It was quite simple really. Just punch the blades into the spikes, then swing on over to the next one. It might hurt like hell for his left arm, but at least he would have a firm grip.

He moved forwards, following Ryuko and Mako closely behind.

After a few minutes, the three had made it to the top of the loop. That's when shit decided to hit the fan.

Maiko's grip began to loosen on Akio's torso, causing her to slowly slip down his back.

"Takahiro, I'm slipping!"

"Shit!"

Akio grimaced and punched a fist into the spike then swung towards the next one.

"Ryuko!" He shouted, catching her attention.

At the midpoint of his swing, Maiko fell from Akio's back, but thanks to the forward momentum she was thrown towards Ryuko.

Ryuko and Maiko reached out to lock hands, but they missed. Going for the next best thing, Maiko latched on to the back of Ryuko's pajamas as she fell, pulling down on the elastic and saving her life in the process.

"H-hey! W-watch what your grabbing!"

Thanks to Maiko's grip, Ryuko's pajama bottoms were pulled down, revealing her bottom for all to see.

Akio bit back a snicker at Ryuko's compromising position, completely oblivious to the car that crashed on the street due to the sight.

"I see London, I see France, I see Ryuko's underpants!"

Akio threw his head back and laughed at his own joke, nearly forgetting that he was hanging on for dear life.

"S-shut up!" Ryuko screeched, her blush deepening.

The four made good time through the rest of the obstacle course, even though Maiko was essentially dead weight.

Thankfully, there were no monkeys, and no barrels to speak of. So far, they had only had to cross a cauldron of lava, a pool of alligators, avoid a giant boulder that rolled after them, and get passed a trail of cheese that led to a pie-trap.

"We must be pretty close now, right?" Ryuko asked hopefully.

"I highly doubt it," Akio sighed.

The four came upon a large gap in the road, where the only possible solution was to jump it.

"Well, this isn't so bad," Akio stated, examining gap. "We can make this."

Ryuko glanced at the gap as well, nodding at Akio's statement.

"Alright. How do we wanna do this?"

"I'll go first, then you throw Mako over, then you come over, followed by Maiko."

The three girls nodded and backed away to give Akio some running room.

This was one of the things that Akio was actually pretty good at. After nearly two years of traversing the slums rooftops, jumping long distances at great heights really didn't faze him.

Taking a few steps back, he sprinted forwards, jumping off of the road and towards the other side.

He hit the landing pretty hard, but given the fact that his coordination was pretty off, it was better than he had hoped.

"Alright," Akio said and dusted himself off. "Come on over you guys."

It didn't take long for them to make the jump. Ryuko tossed Mako over, followed by herself, which left just Maiko. That's where things got dicey.

Ryuko stood on the opposite ledge, prepare to catch Maiko as she jumped. Maiko took a few steps back to give herself a running start, then bolted towards the ledge, achieving lift off and barreling through the air.

Somehow the way she had jumped had caused her arm injury to flare up.

"My arm!"

Maiko grasped at her arm as she flew through the air, making it near impossible to catch Maiko as she flew towards her.

"Are you okay!?" Ryuko cried and reached forwards regardless, inevitably missing Maiko's free hand.

With nothing else to latch onto, Maiko grabbed onto the front of Ryuko's pajamas, pulling them down to reveal her red and white striped underwear.

"A-are you f-fucking serious!?"

Maiko's grip caused Ryuko to lurch forwards, dangerously close to the edge.

"Ryuko!"

Before the two could fall completely Akio had dashed forwards and looped his good arm around Ryuko's waist, keeping the both of them to plummeting to a very unfortunate end.

"God, you just really can't help it, huh?" Akio grunted and pulled the two onto the road. "Just have to show your underwear to everyone, is that it?"

"Shut up!"

Ryuko blushed and adjusted her pants, ignoring Akio's amused expression.

"How much time do we have left?"

Akio glanced around as the four of them made their way towards the entrance of the condo district. They had finally made it through the slums, but that didn't mean they could let up their guard just yet. If anything, it'd only get harder.

Even worse, his painkillers were beginning to wear off, leaving him feeling a slight burn in his shoulder and face and an incredible tiredness that weighed him down. They'd probably last until class started, that is, if they even got there. Otherwise, Akio would just be complete dead weight. It seemed that Mr. Mankanshoku was a tidbit off with his prediction of it lasting the entire day. Instead, the double dose just assaulted him in one huge burst then kind of petered out.

"It's eight," Maiko answered. "Which means we have thirty minutes left."

"No, no!" Mako cried. "If we don't do something, I won't be able to go to school anymore!"

"We'll be fine," Akio replied absently, his eyes scanning forwards.
"Hmmm?"

A school bus drove past the four, slowly entering the One-Star condo district. Several explosions erupted beside the armor-plated bus as it drove along, but it didn't seem to stop it in the slightest.

"Oh great, a minefield," Ryuko mumbled.

"Yeah, but that's a One Star bus," Akio replied. "It's armor plated. Those mines won't do a thing."

"It's passing the checkpoint! Gosh, they have it so easy. I wanna ride, I wanna ride, I wanna ride!"

Akio rubbed his chin, a slight smirk growing on his lips. He glanced over to Maiko, giving her a rather pointed look.

Maiko blinked. "What?"

Before she could protest, Akio grabbed her by her clothing and flung her directly in front of the bus.

"Gah! My arm! Oh, the pain!" Maiko cried as she fell to the ground.

Akio had to give it to her. She could think fast on her feet.

The bus slowed to a stop as its door opened, out walking a One-Star student.

"What the hell is this? Get out of the way No-huh?"

Ryuko's guitar case collided with his face, knocking him out cold.

"Wow," Ryuko whistled, examining the damage. "Nice throw."

"I try," Akio grinned and shrugged. "Alright everyone, get on the bus."

The four jogged into the vehicle, throwing out all of its former riders.

"So, does anyone actually know how to drive this thing?" Ryuko asked.

"I can," Maiko answered, moving to take a seat at the wheel. "Any student that has Lady Satsuki-"

"I don't think so, sweet-cheeks. This is my time to shine."

Akio pushed her out of the way rather forcefully and plopped down in the seat.

"H-hey! What do you think you're doing!?"

Akio ignored her whining from the floor, slowly rubbing the palm of his hand on the bus's wheel. He sighed contently, his other hand moving to the gearstick.

"Oh, yeeeeeah. That's the good stuff."

"You can drive?" Ryuko asked as she made her way to the front.

"You bet your ass I can drive," Akio answered and put the bus into drive. "Hold on tight girls. This is going to get bumpy."

Akio put the pedal to the floor and immediately the bus shot forwards, its engine revving as it caught speed.

"Jesus!"

The three girls were thrown from their feet, having to resort to grabbing on to the nearby seats to prevent themselves from falling over.

Akio laughed maniacally, pushing his foot even further onto the pedal.

He *loved* speed. It was his guilty pleasure. It was just so... exhilarating. It had gotten to a point where Aikuro had refused to ever drive in the same car as him. The girls didn't know that though.

"Can't you slow down!?" Ryuko cried, trying to keep her balance.

"Hell no! Don't you want to get to school on time?!"

Akio twisted the steering wheel to the right, avoiding a layer of mines.

He glanced at the rearview, seeing a lone woman standing in the road nursing a baby. She pulled a machine gun out of nowhere, pointing it directly at the bus.

"Holy shit!" Akio cursed and swerved back to the left. "Get down!"

Not that he even had to say it. With the way he was driving, his three passengers had a hard time standing up straight.

The bullets tore through the bus's interior, whizzing by their heads.

The bus pushed through the minefield, taking bullets and mines in stride. Minutes later, it came upon a large hill, with two condos on either side.

The second the bus began to make its climb up the hill, hundreds of the condos' residents appeared on their balconies with various guns raised and pointed at the armored bus.

"Stay down and hold on tight!"

Akio kept his foot on the gas and ducked underneath the dashboard, praying that nothing got in his way as they tore through the condo district.

Bullets continued to spray the bus, riddling it with bullet holes.

A stray bullet embedded itself in the dashboard, inches away from Akio's head.

"Oh, those sons of bitches," Akio growled, moving his hand to a big red button to his left. "We're going to take it to these bastards!"

"How!?" Ryuko shouted, covering her head with her hands.

"Simple."

Akio pressed down on the button, which released the mini-gun from the center of the bus with Mako standing on the platform as it raised.

"Huh?" Mako examined the gun, slowly rubbing a hand on its barrel.
"Oooh."

Without any warning, the gun began to let loose its rounds, firing them at a rapid succession across the balconies of the condo.

"Hahahaha!" Mako laughed, taking a surprising amount of pleasure from it. "Ryuko! This is totes fun!"

"It's not safe up there, Mako! Come down!"

Mako ignored her, a blush rising to her cheeks. "This feels soooo good..."

One of the grannies from the upper balconies brought out a giant bazooka, taking aim and firing at their armored bus.

"RPG!"

"Excuse me!?"

"R.P.G!" Maiko screeched.

"Good lord!" Akio smacked the button again, retracting Mako and the turret. "Where do they get this shit!?"

The RPG missile flew over head, narrowly missing the roof of the bus.

"MAKO! TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF THE TRIGGER!"

The bullets of the turret sprayed the interior, causing the bus's roof to detach from the rest of the vehicle, turning it into a sort of convertible.

Maiko pointed at the horizon, where the entrance to the Two-Star district waited for them.

"Just a little further, and we're in the Two-Star district!"

Akio saw two puffs of smoke and a flash of fire in his peripherals.

"RPGS incoming!"

Akio slammed his foot on the pedal.

The missiles slammed into the ground directly behind the bus, exploding on impact.

The explosion caused the bus to fly several feet into the air, up and over the Two-Star district, and directly towards the entrance to the Academy.

Time seemed to slow down as they barreled through the air, the three girls screams of pure terror nearly drowning out Akio's child-like laughter.

The four of them were thrown from the destroyed bus as it slid through the gate, the four sprawling across the ground and coming to a stop in front of the Academy.

Akio groaned picked himself off the ground, dusting the dirt off his nice Hawaiian shirt and pants. He ran a hand across his face, cursing when he noticed the blood that had wiped off on it. It seems the crash reopened his facial wound.

He pulled open his shirt to examine his bandages, sighing in relief when he saw no blood. There's that, at least.

If he hadn't sobered up during the bus ride, he sure as hell was now. It was a bumpy ride, but hey, it could have been worse. They were all still alive, were they not?

"Hey. We made it," Akio remarked dryly upon noticing the Academy towering over them.

"We did it you guys!" Ryuko shouted, jumping up and down pumping her fists. "We made it! It's the school!"

"If we can reach our classroom in fifteen minutes, we'll be on time."

"Awesome, that's a piece of cake," Ryuko grinned, grabbing her bicep.

"A piece of cake!" Mako mimicked her.

Akio ignored the three, staring intently at the Academy building. Something was definitely off... It almost seemed... smaller? And the color was a shade lighter too. Where was all of the other students, for that matter? Considering there was only fifteen minutes until class started, you'd think there would be at least someone in the courtyard.

"Hmmm."

Akio walked towards the Academy, immediately noticing another flaw. As he got closer, the building didn't get any larger. The sight of it did, but the building itself stayed the same size.

It was almost as if it were...

"Uh... guys?"

The three turned to Akio.

"Yes?"

"Yeah... this is just a giant picture of the school. Not the school itself."

The three blinked.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Akio sighed and raised a finger, poking at the picture board. There was an audible tapping sound every time he did.

"Do you really think it's possible for me to poke thin air?"

"Uh..." Maiko took a few steps away. "T-that's strange."

Akio frowned and took a step towards her. "Is it?"

The interrogation Akio had planned was put on hold when a dog's barking echoed out in the distance, followed by several yelps of 'guts.'

"Look, Ryuko!" Mako cried, pointing off into the distance. "Guts has brought your uniform!"

Akio squinted his eyes, and sure enough, the Mankanshoku's little dog was running towards them with Senketsu on his back.

"Oh, the pain!"

Using the timely distraction, Maiko pretended to fall over, grabbing Ryuko by her pants on the way down, once again revealing her underwear.

Other than causing Akio to break out in a giggle fit, it had the intended effect she was hoping for.

Guts, *the dog*, got a massive nosebleed at the sight, causing him to slip and slide on a pool of his own blood.

Guts flew past Ryuko and into the waiting foot of Maiko, who punted the poor dog across the fake Academy's courtyard.

Before Senketsu could hit the ground, Maiko snatched it out of the air, laughing madly.

"Maiko, what are you doing!?"

"You let your guard down, Ryuko Matoi! I've been waiting on this moment for ages!"

Akio raised an eyebrow, noticing that none of the three were paying any attention to him. Mako and Ryuko were too wrapped up in Maiko, and Maiko was too busy acting all evil.

"This injured No Star classmate was but a fake identity! My true identity is Maiko Ogure, Disciplinary Committee Head of Trap Development!"

Maiko slipped her clothes off in the blink of an eye and put on Senketsu.

"With this uniform, I can become all powerful! I could become one of the Elite Four- no, I could even overpass Lady Satsuki herself!" Maiko moved her hand to the pin on her wrist, ready to pull. "I'll be the new queen bee of this school! Hahaha!"

Akio slithered up behind the unsuspecting Maiko, pressing his knuckles to her neck, his mouth only inches away from her ear.

"Pull that pin and you're dead."

Maiko slowly turned her head back to Akio, grinning when she noticed he was weaponless.

"What are you going to do, punch me to death before I can pull this pin?"

Akio moved his other hand so that it was inches in front of her face, then released the blades from above his knuckles.

"Do you still want to take that bet?"

Maiko's face paled at the blades, but she still stayed strong, her finger twitching on the pull pin.

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

The two stared each other down, neither one budging an inch.

Akio's eyes flickered away for the briefest of seconds, then back to her, a smirk growing on his lips.

"It looks like I won't have to do anything," Akio said and stepped away

"Huh?"

Ryuko's fist collided with Maiko's chin, sending her flying into the air then smacking back down to the ground in a bloody heap.

"Dumb, deceitful bitch," Ryuko grumbled and walked over to her body, yanking Senketsu off her and throwing it to the ground.

Akio watched dumbfounded as Senketsu seemed to stand straight up, the cloth on his torso moving up and down as if it were talking to Ryuko. He knew better than anyone the power of a Kamui, but to see it like this... was just surreal.

"Hey," Ryuko said, catching his attention. "Senketsu says 'thank you.' He really, really didn't want to have to drink her blood."

"Really now?" Akio glanced at Ryuko then the Kamui, who was staring steadily at him. Akio bowed his head in respect. "The pleasure was mine."

"Would you have really done it?"

Akio turned back to Ryuko, raising an eyebrow.

"You know, killed her."

"Oh," Akio frowned, then shook his head. "No. No I would not have. But that isn't to say I wouldn't have had to."

Ryuko furrowed her brow. "What do you-"

"AIEEE!" Mako screeched, interrupting the two. "There's only five minutes to go until first period begins!"

As if on cue, the giant poster boards that showed the Academy fell over, revealing that the four of them were only on a giant wheeled platform on the road, and not anywhere near the actual Academy.

"Hahaha!"

Ryuko, Akio, and Mako all turned back to Maiko, who was holding a pinky to her mouth as she laughed evilly.

"You may have caught on to my schemes, but you're still trapped! Now, prepare yourselves for my ultimate weapon!"

Maiko pulled out a remote control and pressed down on its button, releasing the locks on the wheels to the platform. Immediately, the platform began to roll down the road, picking up speed at an incredible pace.

The three of them were thrown off their feet, resorting to having to grab the ground to keep from flying off.

"It's all over for you! Once my fake school trap 'Begin All Over Again,' is activated, no one can stop it!"

"Like hell it's over!"

Ryuko grit her teeth and rose to her feet, taking burdened steps towards Maiko, prepared to give her another beat down.

"AH!"

Mako's lost her grip on the platform and flew through the air, saving herself from falling off completely by grabbing on to a stray piece of wood that was left over from the poster board.

"Mako!"

Akio crawled over to where she was dangling and outstretched a hand towards her.

Mako reached out, locking hands with Akio and pulling herself towards him and away from the ledge of the platform.

"Ah... ah..." Mako huffed, hugging herself closer to his arm and away from the ledge. "T-thanks, Akio. I thought I was a goner."

"Don't worry-"

The platform hit a bump in the road, sending the two of them off balance. Mako lost her gripping on Akio, causing her to fall from the speeding platform and over the side of it.

"Mako!"

Akio dove towards her and over the side, latching on to her with one arm and grabbing on to the edge of the platform with the other.

"GAH!"

Akio grimaced, feeling a sharp pain in his left shoulder. The strain was starting to get to him, and he could feel his fingers start to lose their grip.

"Ryuko!"

Just as Akio's let go of the ledge, Ryuko, wearing her activated Senketsu, sprung towards the two, grabbing each of them in her arms as they fell from the platform.

The three made a hard landing on the ground, all three rolling across the surface. They were far, far away from the beginning of the obstacle course, but as luck would have it, they did land near the ropeway system, where several lifts were ready and waiting.

"Ooooh!" Mako ran up to the nearest car, rubbing her hand on the windows. "I always wanted to ride one of these!"

"Hey!"

A One-Star student came trudging up to the three, waving a hand at them.

"You No-Stars can't be down here!"

Ryuko and Akio shared a look and nodded, turning towards the One-Star with murderous intent.

"W-wait a second now," The student raised his hands defensively. "L-let's not be hasty..."

Ryuko belted him in the face with the hilt of her scissor and pushed him into the lift, shoving him at the controls.

"Shut your mouth and take us to the end of the line at full throttle!"

Ryuko punctuated her demands by stabbing her scissor blade right next to his head.

"EEP! S-sure thing!"

"Come on, Mako," Akio said and grabbed her by the shoulders, ushering her towards the lift. "It's time to go."

"But we have to pay the ropeway fair."

"Don't worry, I've already paid."

"Really? Awhhh!" Mako reached up and patted Akio's head. "That's so kind of you, Akio. Thanks!"

Mako turned and skipped into the car, humming a tune.

"Yeah, I'm not paying," Akio grumbled and followed Mako into the car. At this point, he just wanted to lay down and take a nap.

The moment Akio stepped into the car, it shot forwards on the line, barreling upwards and towards the Academy.

Akio was thrown back from the force, landing in one of the cushioned seats of the lift. He would have complained, but the seats were just so comfortable...

Akio yawned and leaned back in his seat, tuning out Ryuko and Mako's worried conversation about how much time was left until class started. The drowsiness was definitely in full force now, a side effect of the boat load of painkillers he was shot up with. At this point, he could care less about if he made it or not. He just wanted to sleep.

The last thing he noticed before he lost consciousness was Ryuko climbing out of the car, and cutting the rope that the lift traveled on.

"Let's see..." Aikuro held up his attendance sheet, his eyes scanning its names. "Next up, Matoi. Ryuko Matoi?"

Aikuro perked his head up, hearing a slight whistling in the distance.

"What is-"

The right wall of the classroom blew apart as one of the lifts crashed directly into the classroom.

The students in their desks were all thrown across the room, making a giant pile on the other side of the classroom of desks and bodies.

Aikuro watched as the door to the lift opened up, and out stepped Ryuko, carrying a slumbering Akio and Mako in her arms. Ryuko walked over to the three desks that were still standing, plopping Akio and Mako in their seats then sitting down in her own.

"Uh..." Aikuro glanced back at his attendance sheet. "Ryuko Matoi?"

Ryuko sighed and raised a hand.

"Present."

Author's Notes:

So there ya have it! As you can see, this chapter was pretty silly compared to the rest of my story. And now you see why Akio was a bit OOC. I picture him as this more reserved and serious smart-ass, but thanks to getting pumped with painkillers, he was more care-free and goofy. But still a major smart ass.

This chapter was interesting to write, but I'll be looking forward to getting back to more of the serious episodes.

Next chapter, we'll get to Tsumugu!

Thanks for reading everyone, I really appreciate all of the support!

Until next time!

Friendship

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the seventh chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

In this chapter, we get to Tsumugu! I never really liked him that much, but I really do like the episode in which he is introduced. That was a good one. Honestly, it might have been one of my favorites.

This was a fun chapter to write, so I hope you guys like it! So read, relax, and enjoy!

Oh, and Happy Memorial Day everyone! Those with a day off, I hope you enjoy it!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Ryuko lead Akio into her new bedroom at the Mankanshoku household, a roll of bandages, cotton balls, cloth, and antiseptic in hand.

"Thanks again, Ryuko. I really appreciate this."

"Don't worry about it," Ryuko replied and sat down on the floor, motioning for Akio to do the same.

It turned out that when Ryuko, Akio, and Mako had returned to the Mankanshoku residence, Mr. Mankanshoku and Mataro were both unconscious, nursing pretty serious head wounds. Mrs. Mankanshoku was too busy cleaning those two up, so she asked Ryuko to clean Akio's wounds and change his bandages.

Akio was a little concerned at first, considering Ryuko had absolutely no medical experience whatsoever, but she had made a good point when she told him that she had watched Mr. Mankanshoku care for his wounds the first time. Then there was the fact that Ryuko had her own fair share of wounds that had to be tended to. She definitely was not a stranger to this line of work.

And if he was being totally honest, he'd rather Ryuko than Mako for this kind of thing.

"I'm going to do the face first, so don't move."

Akio nodded and closed his eyes.

He could hear Ryuko pour some of the antiseptic onto a cotton ball, so he braced himself for the incoming pain.

With surprisingly gentle movements, Ryuko dabbed the cotton onto Akio's newly opened facial wounds.

Akio winced and bit back a curse, but did his best not to move too much.

His face burned terribly so, and the little, rough cotton swab did nothing to alleviate that. The only relief he got was when Ryuko's surprisingly cold hands brushed against his cheek.

"So," Ryuko began, breaking the silence. "How did this *really* happen?"

Akio pursed his lips, exhaling slowly. He was hoping she wouldn't ask.

"I got in a fight with the sewing club president."

There was no point in lying. She'd probably see through it, anyway.

"For?"

Akio couldn't help but smirk. "Loitering."

Ryuko scoffed and purposefully pressed the cotton a little further into Akio's wound, causing him to flinch.

"... Did you at least win?"

"Kicked his ass."

"Good," Ryuko replied, her grin nearly audible in her tone. She removed the cotton swab from his face, then dabbed the wounds with a dry one. "Alright, that should do it for those."

Akio nodded and opened his eyes, pleasantly surprised by Ryuko's handiwork. Given her nature, he was expecting her to be a bit more rough. Of course it stung horribly, but at least it didn't feel like someone had taken sandpaper to it.

"Now, onto the shoulder."

Akio complied, slowly taking off the Hawaiian shirt that he was given earlier. With the painkillers now completely out of his system, nearly his whole body ached. His shoulder, his face, his arm, his torso, everything. Akio made a mental note that he would abstain from any type of opiate from here on out, no matter the pain.

Ryuko placed a hand to her chin, examining Akio's nearly bare chest.

Coming to a decision, she reached for the end of the bandage, and slowly began to unravel it.

"What, you aren't going to use your scissor blade?"

"Yeah, because that's what it's used for," Ryuko replied dryly, but she'd be lying if she said she hadn't thought about it.

Akio repressed the urge to chuckle and wince, content to let Ryuko go to work. She paused once she had gotten the last of the bandage

off and stared intently at Akio's wound. It still oozed blood slightly, since it was essentially the hole the size of a silver dollar in his shoulder, but it wasn't infected. At least she didn't think so. She kept her expression neutral, even if she was slightly doubtful of her skills.

Ryuko took a deep breath and readied the antiseptic on a square of cloth.

"This is probably going to hurt. A lot."

Akio grit his teeth and nodded, clenching his hands into fists.

With ever steady hands, Ryuko brought the cloth to his wound, slowly wiping across it and cleaning it.

"... Ngh!"

Akio dug his fingernails into his palm, drawing blood. He shivered under her touch, but resisted the urge to pull away. He could feel the antiseptic sizzle into the wound, the chemicals seeping into the torn flesh. It was very unpleasant, but it really had to be done. He closed his eyes and took a shaky breath, forcing his mind elsewhere and away from the wounds.

Noticing this, Ryuko decided to speak up to take his mind off of it.

"Thanks for earlier."

Akio peeked an eye open. "Hmmm?"

"The whole thing with Maiko," Ryuko replied, keeping her eyes on his wound. "I know Senketsu thanked you, but I didn't. So, thanks."

Akio opened both eyes and blinked a few times, taking in her words before he let out a loud snort.

Ryuko looked up from his wound with a blush. That was not the response she was expecting.

"W-what!?"

"It's nothing," Akio grinned and shook his head. "You're just so much more different than what I was originally expecting. But you're welcome, nonetheless."

It was true. When he read her dossier, he was expecting someone a lot more... bitchy. Quick-tempered. Ruthless. Ryuko Matoi was the Kanto Vagabond, the Guitar Case Drifter. The girl that went to the schools around Japan, tearing them down to their seams. It took a lot of characteristics to be able to do that, and none of them good. In reality, she was just a normal, teenage girl that wanted answers. Hell, if anything she was actually more well-mannered than half of the girls her age. Sure, she has her fair share of flaws, but who doesn't?

Ryuko continued to stare at Akio as she processed his words, then turned back to the wound to finish her work, pursing her lips.

Akio chuckled. "Don't worry, it's a compliment."

"I take it you didn't think too highly of me then."

"No, not at first."

Ryuko finished cleaning his wound, then moved to the bandages, unraveling the roll without speaking.

"I'm guessing you're wondering what I originally thought of you?"

Ryuko shrugged and began bandaging his wound, wrapping the white cloth around his chest. She actually was sort of curious.

"Well, when I first read about you, I thought you'd be more of a coldhearted, ruthless, deviant."

"Wha-?" Ryuko looked up from her work, glaring daggers at Akio. "What gave you that idea?"

Akio shrugged slightly. "It was just a faulty preconception. All I had to go off of was what information I had, as well as the sparse news reports."

"Hmph," She couldn't really dispute that. She didn't look that good on paper. "So what changed?"

"These last few days," Akio answered, a cheeky smile growing on his lips. "You really let your soft and gentle side show."

Ryuko growled and poked his wound.

"OW!"

"Watch who you're calling soft, smart-ass."

With class over for the day, Akio found himself walking down one of the numerous hallways of the school. He promised Ryuko and Mako that he'd catch up with them for lunch, but he had to drop by the Academy's library to drop off some near overdue books. The students that manned the library could get really, REALLY, scary if you didn't return their books in the allotted time, and Akio really didn't want to get a horse's head in his bed later that night.

Walking down the empty hallway, Akio whistled a tune to himself as he glanced around. Now that he thought about it, it was rather suspicious that there were no students to be seen. From past experiences, that usually lead to something terrible.

And now that he was really paying attention, there was something pungent in the air. Something like onions, miso soup, and...

"Chili?"

"Ah, you have a good sense of smell, Takahiro."

Akio flinched and spun on his heels towards the unfamiliar voice.

A student stood behind him, smiling smugly at him with crossed arms. He wore a white, Two Star uniform, made out to look like a chef's outfit. His long black hair was tied up in a cooking bonnet, and his brown, beady eyes were locked onto Akio. To top it off, he even wore a white chef's hat.

The fact that this man smelled like all three of those things were not lost on him.

"Kuruo Honda. President of the cooking club. To what do I owe the honor?"

"Oh, please," Honda sneered. "The pleasure is all mine."

In the blink of an eye, Kuruo Honda's Two Star uniform activated, revealing his power as the cooking club president.

A giant, steel cauldron appeared on the front of his outfit, the steam from its contents spilling out over the side. Another pair of arms grew from underneath his armpits, metal in its design. Honda's fake arms carried a spoon and fork in each of its hands. It reminded Akio of Iori's uniform, but less intimidating.

The president took a step forwards, grinning madly as his fake arms reached into the cauldron

"What's the meaning of this!?"

"Quite simple, really. You're coming with me!"

Honda's fake arms moved like lightning, using the utensils to fling scolding hot food at Akio.

Akio ducked and rolled to avoid the first barrage. He glanced back at the thrown food, raising an eyebrow.

"Mashed potatoes?"

"Keen eye, Takahiro. But I assure you, I'm not some one-trick pony!"

The cauldron that was attached to the front of Honda's uniform tipped forwards, spilling out its contents onto the floor and towards Akio.

"Really!?"

Akio jumped into the air, activating his bladed knuckles. He punched each hand into the nearby wall, using the penetrating blades to keep himself from falling into the boiling hot miso soup that flooded the floor.

"Seriously, Honda," Akio said from his perch. "What the hell do you want with me?"

"Isn't it obvious? You're Matoi's friend, are you not?"

Akio frowned. He didn't like where this was going.

"And?"

"*And*, could you imagine what your friend will do when she hears that I've taken you hostage?"

"Honda, this has to be the dumbest idea I've ever heard. Did you really think I wouldn't put up a fight?"

"No. Of course you would. Mankanshoku would have been simpler, but that's what every other club is going after. That's why you're a prime candidate for taking hostage," Honda grinned and shook his head, chuckling. "Besides, can you imagine the praise I'll get when I capture the No Star Wonder that's been giving Lady Satsuki so much trouble? I'll be loved! Adored! I might even get a Three Star!"

Honda's metal cauldron filled with another mystery food, signaling the fight was about to resume.

Using all four hands this time, Honda dug into his cauldron, flinging another salvo of food Akio's way, this time hardened rice balls.

Akio leaped from his position on the wall, all the while peeling off the backpack he was wearing. Ignoring the stinging pain of getting pelted by rice balls, Akio flung his backpack down on the ground, using it to stop himself from landing in the soup.

With his forward progress, when Akio landed on the backpack it shot forwards, providing him with a make shift surfboard.

"H-hey! What do you think you're doing!?"

Honda picked up his pace, flinging even more rice at the oncoming Akio.

Akio took the hits in stride, ignoring the pain as he flew towards his target.

Seeing no possible out, Honda tipped over his cauldron, unleashing a wave of rice balls in an attempt to slow Akio down.

Akio leapt from his backpack to avoid it, kicking out with his right leg and connecting with Honda's chin. The cooking club president flew to the side, slamming into the nearby wall completely knocked out.

"Well," Akio sighed as the adrenaline slowly left his body. "That wasn't too bad."

It honestly wasn't. He was expecting more from a Two Star. Honda wasn't a close-combat fighter, though. So once Akio closed the distance it was pretty easily decided.

It was strange, though. The Two-Stars would be coming after him now? Or was this just a fluke? It was unprecedented, to say the least, but if it took heat off of Ryuko and Mako he'd welcome it. They might be Two Stars, but Akio was confident in his abilities. He could handle them.

He rolled his left shoulder, testing his wound. Not bad. He'd have to thank Ryuko later.

Ryuko... Mako...

"Oh, right! Lunch!"

Akio picked up his soaked backpack and shook it off, then ran down the hallway, leaving the unconscious chef slumping against the wall. It could be someone else's problem, not is.

He rounded a few corners and went down a few flights of stairs, finally making it to bottom floor. There was only a few hundred more feet until he made it to the courtyard where he told them he'd meet them.

Akio continued his light sprint, making it to the entrance to the courtyard when a flash of black and red catching his eyes.

He stopped completely, his mouth agape as he took in the sight before him.

At the other end of the courtyard he saw three figures. Mako was lying on the ground, off to the side, seemingly unconscious. Ryuko was lying on her back, pinned down by the foot of another figure. A gun was pressed in her face, slowly inching closer.

Akio felt his blood boil. Tsumugu Kinagase. What the *fuck* did he think he was doing!?

Without thinking, he had dashed forwards and discarded his backpack, his arms trailing behind him as his fingers brushed against the buttons on his palms.

Tsumugu's head perked up at the sound of fast approaching footsteps. With cat-like reflexes he spun around and leveled his gun at the oncoming Akio, pulling the trigger without a second thought.

Akio leapt through the air to dodge the needles, landing behind him and directly above the downed Ryuko. He had to keep his legs in a wide stance as not to step on her.

Before Tsumugu could turn around to face him, Akio raised his leg, kicking him in the ribs.

Tsumugu took the hit in stride and pinned Akio's leg to his midsection with his arm. With a firm grip he tossed Akio across the courtyard.

Akio flew several feet away, hitting the ground and rolling to his feet, barring his teeth at his Nudist Beach colleague.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

Tsumugu lowered his gun ever so slightly, but still had it trained at Akio.

"I do what I must, Akio. This abomination must be destroyed."

"I can't let you do that, Tsumugu," Akio growled, raising his fists. "I won't let you hurt either of them."

He punctuated his declaration by releasing his blades, the scraping of steel echoing throughout the courtyard.

The two stared each other down, daring for one of them to make the first move. Ryuko watched on anxiously, struggling to stand after she had been bombarded with so many needles.

Tsumugu had the clear advantage, but Akio could see the hesitation in his eyes. Kamui's were one thing, but Akio was on the same team, and the brother of Aikuro.

Akio flinched, feeling a slight prick on his finger. Seeing a small pin needle with a note attached, he pulled it from his finger and opened up the note.

Meet me at the sake bar in the slums. We'll be safe from Kiryuin's eyes.

It seemed that Tsumugu got the exact same note. The two nodded at each other and lowered their arms. Tsumugu turned and walked

away, leaving the three.

"Hey, come back here damn it!"

Without looking Tsumugu fired a shot at Ryuko from his wrist. The shot flew by Ryuko's face, so close that it cut a few strands of hair.

"I'll be back... to strip you tomorrow."

Tsumugu's eyes met Akio's as if he was asking for a challenge, before he turned and walked away.

Akio ground his teeth and walked over to Ryuko, forcibly pulling the pin that held her wrist down. He outstretched his hand, helping Ryuko to her feet.

"Who the hell was that!?" Ryuko hissed as she was pulled to her feet.

A reasonable response when someone threatens your life.

Akio sighed and closed his eyes, calming himself down. He couldn't just explain it to her. As Aikuro told him, she has to prove that she deserves these answers. Besides, it'd probably be pretty hard to explain right here.

It seemed that Mako was alright from first glance. It was only the needles that got her. If she was alright as well, then he really had to get a move on.

"I'll figure it out," Akio answered as he walked away. He stopped after several feet, turning his head back to the flustered Ryuko. "Just be careful until then."

Akio walked into the shady bar, glancing around. The customers were to be as expected. Pretty dirty looking. This wasn't exactly a

fancy establishment. Everyone in here was looking to get drunk, plain and simple.

The place itself wasn't bad. For a bar in the slums, it was less dirty than he was expecting. It must have been because they got a lot of business, so they had the money to keep the place decently clean.

Akio spotted Aikuro sitting in the far corner of the bar, nursing a shot of sake. That wasn't surprising. It was always his brother's favorite drink.

"Hey," Akio greeted as he took a seat at the bar beside him.

"Hey, Akio," Aikuro responded, motioning for the bartender to get Akio a drink as well.

"I'm alright," Akio shook his head at the bartender, who nodded and went to go serve another customer.

Aikuro rose an eyebrow. "You don't want anything?"

"No."

Aikuro shrugged and went back to his drink, taking a small sip.

"When's he getting here?"

"Any time now."

As if on cue, Tsumugu walked through the entrance to the bar, slowly trudging towards Aikuro and Akio.

Tsumugu wore the same expression he always did. Stone cold. No emotion. Then there was the fact that he really was a giant of a man. His combat suit might have added to his physique, but he was still a huge man. The only thing that took away from his threatening appearance was his red mohawk. Akio never did like it. It made him look foolish. The hair style itself was just plain dumb.

Tsumugu flicked the pin Aikuro had given to him at Aikuro's drink, landing perfectly upright in the liquid.

Aikuro smirked and set his drink down.

"'I hate being interrupted.' That's what you wanted to say, right, Tsumugu?"

"Hmph."

Tsumugu huffed and leaned his rear against the bar, placing his hands in his pockets.

Akio glared at him, his thinly veiled anger evident on his features.

"Why did you call me?" The mohawked man grunted.

"Pull up a seat!" Aikuro grinned and turned towards him. "The Kiryuins don't have eyes here. There's no reason we can't have a friendly conversation."

"Why did you call me?"

Aikuro turned back to his drink, the popped collar of his button-up nearly covering his face.

"Leave Matoi alone. This is a crucial period."

Akio kept quiet, content to let the conversation run its course. Aikuro was saying what he would, anyways.

"I can't do that."

"What!?"

Akio sprung from his seat, slamming a fist on the bar.

"You know full well-"

"Akio."

Aikuro raised a hand, motioning for Akio to quiet down and sit back in his seat.

Akio growled but did as he was told.

"Satsuki Kiryuin's national school conquest is complete, except for Kansai," Aikuro continued, undisturbed. "'Thwart the ambitions of the Kiryuins by using the Kamui.' That was Dr. Matoi's goal, and that's the path we of the Nudist Beach have chosen."

Tsumugu stepped away from the bar, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. He took a deep drag, exhaling slowly.

"You're interfering with that path."

Aikuro passed Tsumugu a glass.

"That uniform is too dangerous," Tsumugu finally spoke up, ignoring the glass given to him.

"What if Matoi proves herself to be a powerful ally?" Aikuro asked, pouring the man a drink of sake.

"You must understand, Tsumugu," Akio entered in. "Ryuko might be our only chance of bringing down the Kiryuins. She's strong. Stronger than anything I've ever seen."

Tsumugu turned back to the bar, pushing away the drink he was given. He turned to Akio, giving him a hardened stare.

"So you're on a first name basis with her now," Tsumugu stated disapprovingly, then turned back to Aikuro. "If she's consumed by that thing, it'll be a threat even greater than the Kiryuins... That's why I'm going to terminate it now. Before she gets consumed by it and becomes a monster."

Akio stood from his seat, angrily smacking away the glass of sake near him.

"You will do no such thing, Tsumugu! You know full well we need her!"

"We need her? Or do *you* need her?"

Akio crossed his arms, his glare deepening.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Tsumugu scoffed, taking a drag from his cigarette. "You're too soft, Akio. You were never cut out for this type of work."

Akio took a step forward, his hand clenching into a fist.

"Why, you-!"

"People and clothing aren't enemies," Aikuro interrupted. "Isn't that what Kinue said?"

Tsumugu's body visibly flinched, his fingers digging into the wood of the bar.

"I owe you a debt. I'll do anything you ask. Except when it comes to a Kamui."

Tsumugu took a step back from the bar, taking another drag from his cigarette.

"If HQ were to find out, they'd confiscate all that gear of yours," Aikuro said glibly.

Tsumugu turned and walked towards the entrance, stopping to address Aikuro one last time.

"Even if they did, I'd still continue to go after that Kamui. Even as a naked Nudist."

As he continued to walk away, Akio called out to him one last time.

"If you continue down this path, you and I will be enemies, Tsumugu. Be aware of that."

If he had heard him, he didn't show any signs of it. Tsumugu continued his walk out of the bar, eventually walking out of sight.

Akio exhaled slowly through his nose, his anger slowly dissipating.

"You should lessen up, Akio."

Akio turned to Aikuro, sitting back down in his seat.

"What do you mean?"

"You said yourself that Ryuko was strong. Why do you feel the need to jump in every chance you get?"

Akio furrowed his brow. "It's my job, Aikuro."

"Yes, but she's never going to grow if you keep babysitting her like this," Aikuro replied bluntly, taking a sip from his drink.

Akio frowned and tilted his head down, clenching at his knees. He hated to admit it, but his brother might be right. Was he going too easy on her? Dr. Matoi asked him to keep an eye on her, but was he going overboard? She didn't exactly need his help, but the situations she kept finding herself in had required Akio's assistance to bail her out. Except for the fight with Satsuki, that is.

Except for the fight with Satsuki... in which she held her own.

Wow. Maybe he really was going a bit overboard.

"Maybe you're right," Akio sighed. "But I won't stop completely. If she finds herself in a life or death situation, I *will* intervene."

Aikuro smirked, taking another sip from his sake. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Akio. Now then, I'm pouring you a drink and you're going to like it."

Akio was about to protest, but the look his brother was giving him told him that he wasn't taking no for an answer.

Akio grinned and nodded, accepting the freshly poured drink from his brother. Eh, so what. He could stand to loosen up once and a while. Besides, sharing a drink with his brother was always fun.

The two clinked their cups together, each taking a drink from their respective glasses.

They might have a duty to uphold, but there was no law saying that they couldn't have fun.

The next day, Akio found himself standing on the giant wall that surrounded the Academy, his arms crossed as he watched the courtyard below him. The wind was blowing fiercely at this height, but it felt good, refreshing even. The wind licked at his skin, cooling him off.

He told himself that he'd just be a spectator of this showdown, but if things got hairy he'd have to jump in. He wasn't about to watch her get pummeled, possibly even killed. There was no way of knowing where Tsumugu would draw the line. All he knew was that Senketsu was his primary target. Akio would have to intervene for him, too.

Akio blinked, realizing he just referred to the article of clothing as 'him.' Well, he guess he wasn't too far off. Senketsu obviously had a conscious. He even thanked Akio the other day.

That didn't make it any less weird, though.

His eyes lingered on Ryuko, who stood in the middle of the courtyard, her sword planted in the ground as she stood firmly.

However, when Akio looked closely, he could tell that she was shaking. She must have still been rattled from the other day. He wished he could do something, but Aikuro was right. It was important that she handled this herself.

Akio's eyes twitched. The sound of a rocket being fired was audible off in the distance.

The fight had begun.

A salvo of missiles flew out of the Academy's gate, barreling towards Ryuko.

The minute the missiles hit their target, Tsumugu ran through the front gate, carrying a rocket launcher on his shoulder.

"Life Fiber Synchronize, Kamui Senketsu!"

Akio's eyes widened. The smoke that clouded Ryuko was dense, but from this height he could still see her. The sailor uniform she was wearing expanded outwards and away from her body before collapsing inwards, squeezing tightly against her skin. The outfit changed completely, turning into the Kamui that Akio had been accustomed to seeing.

Now that he witnessed this, Akio became aware of the fact that he had never actually seen her transform like this. It was... incredible, to say the least. As he was an observer now, he could actually feel the power that radiated from her.

Tsumugu made the first move, dropping his rocket launcher and pulling out his gun. He fired relentlessly as he ran, his needles flying towards Ryuko.

Ryuko smirked as the needles bounced off her. She leaped forwards, crossing the distance between the two in a second. Tsumugu raised his gun, blocking Ryuko's scissor blade as she

swung it down. Tsumugu still felt the brunt of the impact, a rather deep gash forming on his cheek.

It seemed that Tsumugu had expected this. At the press of a button, another salvo of missiles barreled towards Ryuko, colliding with her body.

"Gah!"

Akio flinched at her cry of pain, but he stayed rooted in his spot. She wasn't done yet.

Tsumugu backpedaled away from the explosion, loading another strip of needles into his gun. Without any hesitation, he fired another round of needles towards Ryuko, but they still bounced off of her and Senketsu.

But it seemed that that was enough.

Ryuko fell to one knee, apparently as surprised at the turn of events as Akio was.

There was more to it than just that.

A swarm of square pieces of paper flew towards Ryuko and Tsumugu, the two jumping away in time before the paper hit them.

"What?" Akio mumbled.

A swarm of One-Stars took the field, with two Two-Stars leading them. Each of the groups were dressed in decadent robes, signaling that they must have been a more elegant type of club.

Akio took a good look at the two groups of students, confirming his suspicion. On one side of the courtyard was the poetry club, and on the other was the rakugo club.

It wasn't just them, either. Another group of students came through the entrance to the Academy, and by the looks of it, it was the

gardening club.

"Damn it," Akio growled. He hadn't been expecting this, but he should have. This was school grounds.

Tsumugu threw a handful of smoke grenades onto the ground, effectively enveloping the entire courtyard in smoke.

Akio saw a figure dash towards the Academy, running in through the doors. That was all of the indication he needed. Whether it be Tsumugu or Ryuko, they'd both follow each other. Neither one would give up that easily.

Cursing under his breath, Akio ran across the giant wall of the Academy, heading towards where he saw the figure run into the building. From his position atop the school, it'd be hard to get inside, but Akio came prepared.

As he ran, Akio reached into his backpack, pulling out a rope with a hook at the end. Finding a suitable spot, Akio slammed the sharpened hook into the cement of the wall, then walked to the edge. He quickly tied the rope around his waist, and with a silent prayer, he jumped over the side.

Akio fell off the ledge, but thanks to the rope he swung back towards the Academy, straight at one of the numerous glass windows. Crossing his arms across his chest, he broke through the glass, landing inside of the school with a roll.

There were no signs of anyone on this floor, but Akio could hear the sounds of explosions coming from a few floors before. He could also hear the sound of an orchestra playing in the distance, but he decided to ignore it. It was probably just Jakuzure practicing.

Picking himself off the ground, Akio ran towards the stairwell, descending the steps two at a time. His urgency reminded him of when he had nearly bled out a few days ago, but he tried his best to ignore it. There were more important matters to attend to.

As Akio ran, the sounds of explosions became more apparent. There was one more singular explosion, then everything went silent.

Akio finally made it to the bottom floor, the sight that awaited him was of no surprise. There were several unconscious One Stars, as well several scorch marks that marked the floor. It seemed that Ryuko wasn't the only one that fell for Tsumugu's trap.

A gunshot echoed down the hallway, followed by several others. After that, complete, utter silence.

Akio's eyes widened as the color drained from his face.

His legs carried him down the hallway, towards where the sound came from. He found himself outside the men's bathroom, where he could faintly hear the sound of two people conversing.

"Do you understand now? This thing just tried to escape by itself."

Akio skidded to a stop, standing directly in front of the men's room, the sight before him causing him to freeze completely.

"You're wrong."

Tsumugu stood straight in the middle of the bathroom, his gun pointed downwards towards the black sailor uniform on the ground. Several pins were stuck in Senketsu, effectively adhering it to the ground.

Ryuko was huddled in the corner of the wall and one of the bathroom stalls, curling inwards to hide her near naked form. She was only wearing her white and blue undergarments, with several scrapes and bruises covering her body. Her eyes had glossed over as she stared vacantly at the sight of her lifeless sailor uniform.

Tsumugu glared at the beaten Ryuko. He had heard this spiel before.

"It knew that you were of no more use, so it-"

"Senketsu was trying..."

"Life Fibers are parasites!"

"... To protect me!"

Akio had heard enough. This man was his enemy.

Springing forwards, he swung his fist towards the unsuspecting Tsumugu.

Ryuko's eyes darted towards the oncoming Akio, giving Tsumugu the only hint he needed.

Tsumugu spun around, raising his gun in an attempt to block the oncoming fist.

Akio had expected this, however. Having feinted to the right, Akio swung with his left, immediately pressing down on the button on his palm and releasing his hidden blades.

Tsumugu jumped away to avoid the lethal blow, but the blades still scraped against his abdomen, cutting into his uniform and into his skin.

Tsumugu grunted in pain and raised his gun, pointing it directly at Akio and pulling the trigger.

Akio ducked, weaving to the right and lifting his leg, kicking Tsumugu's gun out of his hand. Tsumugu might have the better equipment, but in these tight quarters, Akio had the upper hand.

But Tsumugu was no slouch when it came to hand to hand, either.

Tsumugu swung with his right, causing Akio to duck lest he got hit. Now that Akio was having to respond to Tsumugu's attacks, he was losing his advantage.

Tsumugu swung upwards with his left, nailing Akio in the stomach.

"Oof!"

The blow knocked the wind out of Akio, disorienting him and causing him to backpedal a few steps.

Tsumugu pushed his advantage, twisting to deliver a vicious roundhouse kick directly at Akio's head.

Raising his right arm, he blocked Tsumugu's kick with his forearm.

Not waiting for a follow up, Akio swung his other fist at Tsumugu's chest, his blades pointed directly at his heart.

Tsumugu lashed out, grabbing onto Akio's wrist before his blades could connect with his chest. With his other hand he punched Akio across the face, knocking him to the ground.

Akio growled as he wiped the blood from his mouth, raising his head just in time to see Tsumugu stalking towards him and sending his boot towards his chest.

He rolled to his left to avoid the oncoming kick, rolling towards one of the four bathroom stalls in the room.

Akio grabbed on to the door closest to him and swung it towards the oncoming Tsumugu. The door smacked Tsumugu in the face, stunning him.

Taking the brief opportunity, Akio hopped to his feet, striking out at Tsumugu's unprotected face, but retracting his blades at the last second.

His fist connected with Tsumugu's jaw, sending him to the ground.

Ryuko watched the scene play out in astonishment, unsure of what she should do. She wanted to help, but she just couldn't. The acupuncture needles that had hit her left her feeling incredibly heavy and weak. She didn't think she could move if she wanted to.

Tsumugu tried to rise to his feet, but Akio had already pounced on him, pushing him back towards the ground with a knee to his chest. He pressed his fist to Tsumugu's neck, his fingers brushing against the button on his palm.

"You know what happens next," Akio grunted, out of breath. "Give up."

Tsumugu frowned but didn't say anything.

The seconds ticked away like hours, Tsumugu's eyes never leaving Akio's. Akio's hand trembled against Tsumugu's neck, his resolve beginning to crumble. How did he keep finding himself in this position? One day, he told himself he would never stoop so low as to kill someone. The next, he decided that if he absolutely had to, he would.

And what about now? Where does he draw the line? In this world, he can't afford to be weak. It's not just his life on the line anymore, and that fact makes him think.

Why does he put it on himself to be the judge, the jury, and the executioner? .

Ryuko was strong. Not just physically, but in spirit. She'd never give in, no matter who the enemy. And with Senketsu, Akio highly doubted that she'd ever need to. Dr. Matoi told him to watch out for her, but did she really need it, in all honesty?

"Why are you fighting so hard for this girl?"

Akio blinked, his train of thought derailed. It was as if Tsumugu heard his internal dilemma.

He looked up from Tsumugu and at Ryuko, who was still huddled in the same corner, staring wide eyed at Akio.

"Well, when I first read about you, I thought you'd be more of a coldhearted, ruthless, deviant."

"Wha-? What gave you that idea?"

"It was just a faulty preconception. All I had to go off of was what information I had, as well as the sparse news reports."

"Hmph. So what changed?"

"These last few days. Heh, you really let your soft and gentle side show."

"..."

"OW!"

"Watch who you're calling soft, smart-ass."

The answer was obvious.

Akio slowly withdrew his hand from Tsumugu's neck, but kept his knee pushing down on his chest.

"Ryuko is my friend."

He pushed himself off of Tsumugu and rose to his feet.

"If you come after her again, you're going to regret it. If Ryuko doesn't kick your ass first, I will."

Akio turned away from Tsumugu and walked over to Senketsu, gingerly pulling out each of the pins that held him down. He ran his hand across the cloth, wiping off some of the dirt and grime.

"Sorry about that, Senketsu. You had just been cleaned, too."

With Senketsu in hand he walked over to Ryuko, lowering down on his haunches and smiling softly at the battered girl.

"Here."

Ryuko accepted the offered Senketsu, hugging it tightly to her chest.

"Can you walk?"

"Um," Ryuko blinked, her hug tightening around Senketsu. "I think so."

Akio outstretched his hand. "Good. Then let's go."

Ryuko nodded and took his hand, pulling herself up.

Akio glanced back at Tsumugu, who had by now risen to his feet and was still glaring at Ryuko and Senketsu.

"Ask yourself this, Tsumugu," Akio began, facing him once more.
"Would your sister approve of your actions?"

Tsumugu's eyes narrowed slightly as they fell to the floor, guilt and sadness slightly etched onto his face.

Akio tugged on Ryuko's hand as he began to lead her out of the bathroom, both stopping when they heard the sound of an orchestra playing.

That could only mean one thing.

Tsumugu and Akio met each other's gazes, both nodding. Tsumugu's hands moved to a hidden button on his outfit, his other moving towards his grenades.

"Your battle against the Kamui was magnificent."

A crowd of band players appeared at the entrance to the bathroom, moving aside for Nonon Jakazure to walk forwards, her eyes on Tsumugu and ignoring both Ryuko and Akio.

"However, I've grown bored with the melody you play."

Jakazure's eyes moved to Akio.

"Hand over the girl."

"Hand over the Kamui to the likes of you?" Tsumugu spoke up for him. "Never."

Akio glared fiercely at the pink haired student, his hand tightening around Ryuko's.

"Can you run?" Akio whispered, soft enough so only Ryuko could hear.

Ryuko shook her head ever so slightly.

"Alright. Then don't take this the wrong way."

"Turn yourself in. The both of you," Jakazure took a step forwards, frowning dangerously at the three.

"Take what the wrong way?" Ryuko whispered back.

"Let me tell you two useful pieces of information," Tsumugu said, turning to face Jakazure fully. "One, you people will never catch me. Two: I won't let you take these three, either!"

Tsumugu pressed the button on his outfit, causing it to bubble up and expand.

"Now!"

Akio placed his arm underneath Ryuko's knees, picking her up bridal style. Just as Tsumugu's vest exploded into a giant smoke cloud, Akio dashed forwards and past the dumbstruck orchestra, already making it to the giant window that was behind the group as they regained their composure.

"I won't let you escape!" Jakazure yelled after them.

Akio ignored her shout, turning his body to the side as he ran, leading with his shoulder. He jumped and collided with the glass window, breaking it. Right as he had jumped, the bathroom behind them exploded, no doubt thanks to one of Tsumugu's grenades.

The two plummeted to the ground, Akio making a hard landing on his feet. He grunted in pain, but ignored it. As long as he could move, it didn't matter.

Akio continued running away from the Academy, ignoring the stinging pain in his right ankle. He must have sprained it.

"Ryuko, are you alright?"

"..."

When she didn't respond, Akio glanced downwards, noticing that Ryuko had fallen into a somewhat peaceful sleep in his arms. How she fell asleep during all of that, he'd never know.

Akio let out an exasperated sigh, but a slight smile tugged at his lips.

This is what friends do for each other, right?

Author's Notes:

So there you have it! Lots of Ryuko/Akio interactions this chapter, so that was fun to write. The bar scene was fun too. I'll have to fit in some more Aikuro and Akio brotherly scenes in upcoming chapters.

I'm really, really, trying hard not to make Akio appear all white-knightey, simply because I hate when that happens, and I don't think that's in Akio's character. I feel like I've walked a fine line with it so far, so if he ever does, let me know. I know it can be kind of annoying when the male protagonists white knights the female protagonist. The way I see it so far, is that it's one friend

protecting another. If the positions were reversed, Ryuko would do the same, I think. So yeah, let me know if I go too overboard with it.

Thanks for reading you guys! You've all been so awesome to me so far, and I really do appreciate it. Writing an OC story can be kind of frowned on sometimes, so to hear that you guys like it is like music to my ears.

Until next time!

Interlude

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the eighth installment of Before My Body is Dry!

Pretty low key chapter this time around. Lots of character interactions and character developments, but nothing extremely intense compared to the last few chapters. Don't expect that to be the norm, though. We're getting to the point in the story where shit really, really picks up. We're actually closer to Ryuko's bouts with the Elite Four than I thought. And oh, do I got some things planned for that.

I hope you guys don't mind, but I decided to stack the Uzu episode and Fight Club episodes together. Honestly, Akio wouldn't really be doing that much in those episodes, other than being an observer, so I decided against writing them and going for more original scenes.

So read, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"No, Akio. I'm deathly serious."

Akio sat on the beaten down couch in his apartment, his arms crossed as he stared angrily at his older brother, Aikuro.

Aikuro met his gaze, not budging an inch.

"I want you to take a week off from school, and that's final."

"A whole week? That's ridiculous! I refuse."

"Are you even going to listen to my reasoning?" Aikuro asked hotly, running a hand through his blue hair.

"Sure!" Akio threw his hands up in exasperation. "Have at it!"

"Point number one," Aikuro began, ignoring his brother's tone and raising a lone finger, pointing at Akio's taped up ankle. "This is the *third* injury you've gotten. Third. Your previous wounds haven't even healed yet and you're already jumping through windows and fighting Two Stars."

Akio grumbled under his breath, turning his head away.

"Point number two," Aikuro continued, raising a second finger. "You have now got the full attention of Kiryuin and her Elite Four. Not only have you made your allegiance to Ryuko well known, but you were at the scene of the crime when Jakazure confronted Tsumugu. For God's sake, you even ran off with Ryuko in your arms! They're going to draw conclusions that you and Tsumugu are working together, and sooner or later they'll find out that you were adopted by my parents, which would blow my cover. That information would be pretty hard to find considering how deeply it's been buried, but given Kiryuin's resources, she'd find out eventually."

Akio's furrowed his brow, his anger slowly dissipating. He made some valid points... Akio might have been suspect from day one, but Aikuro was still pretty deep undercover.

"And three," Aikuro said, raising a third finger. "You've been working yourself to the bone, even with the injuries you've been sporting. You could use the break."

Akio bit his lower lip, his expression turning guilty. He had been working awfully hard; maybe even too much. There was no doubt his brother would be beginning to worry about him. Besides, he wouldn't

want to be the cause of any unneeded stress in an already stressful situation for Aikuro.

"So please, just take the week off. I'll mark you as present and no one will even know that you're not there. If Kiryuin personally makes an appearance, I'll make up some lie."

Akio exhaled slowly and leaned back on the couch, letting his arms drape over the sides.

"Alright, Aikuro. You win. I'll take the week off."

Aikuro sighed in relief and sat down in the wooden chair next to the couch, kicking his feet up on their rickety coffee table.

"Thank you, Akio. To be honest, you've been worrying the hell out of me. It's like every other day you find yourself in some other ridiculous situation."

"Yes, it does seem that way, doesn't it?" Akio shook his head and chuckled before turning serious once again. There was one thing missing from Aikuro's argument that really bugged him. "I really do appreciate your concern, brother, but if no one sees me for a whole week, won't someone get suspicious?"

"They might get suspicious," Aikuro said with a shrug. "But, it's better they be suspicious than them knowing outright, which could very well happen if things continue as they have been. If you lay low for a little while, hopefully things will die down."

Akio nodded with his reasoning. "Yeah, I guess so. But-"

BANG, BANG, BANG!

Aikuro and Akio shared a look before both of their eyes drifted to their apartment door, where someone seemed to be knocking on it as if their life depended on it.

The two nodded at each other, both going into action. Aikuro rose from his spot, putting back on his glasses and adopting his fake teacher persona. Akio moved into the kitchen and where their guest at the door wouldn't be able to see him, but still close enough in case he was needed.

"Yes?" Aikuro mumbled lazily as he opened the door.

Aikuro didn't have to do much pulling.

The door slammed open, and in walked one very angry looking Ryuko carrying one very sharp scissor blade. She pushed Aikuro back to the opposite wall, all the while shoving her scissor blade in her face.

"N-now, now, let's calm down Ryuko!"

"Bite me! What the hell is going on?"

"What do you mean?" Akio asked as he stepped out of the kitchen and towards her.

Ryuko's glanced away from Aikuro and to Akio, her angry expression worsening. She lowered her scissor blade, turning to face Akio fully.

"You two were in cahoots with Mohawk Man, weren't you?" Ryuko asked coldly.

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about!" Aikuro exclaimed, catching her attention.

Ryuko pressed her blade back in Aikuro's face, pushing him back to the window.

"Keep playing dumb after seeing this, I dare you."

Ryuko pulled a photo out of her shirt and lifted it high. The pictured depicted Akio, Aikuro, and Tsumugu all at the bar they had met at the other night, conversing.

"See? Here you two are with Mohawk Man, right in the corner of this picture."

"T-that's not-"

"Aikuro," Akio growled. "I thought you said we'd be safe from any prying eyes down there."

"So, you don't deny it?" Ryuko asked, glancing at Akio, her glare deepening. "Damn it, I was at death's door! Tell me what's going on, NOW!"

Aikuro pushed Ryuko's blade away with one hand, while running a hand through his hair and taking off his sunglasses with the other.

"Yes, but because of him, the bond between you and Senketsu has grown stronger," Aikuro said matter-of-factly, reverting back to his usual self. "His name is Tsumugu Kinagase. I admit, he's a member of my organization."

Aikuro moved his hands to his shirt, pulling it apart to reveal his bare chest, glowing nipples and all. Ryuko blushed at the sight, turning her head away in embarrassment. She took a few steps backwards, stumbling onto the couch.

"Now that Satsuki Kiryuin has her hands on a Kamui, it was necessary to put you through a trial by fire so you can defeat her."

Ryuko brought her scissor blade back around, smacking Aikuro in the face with the hilt of it.

"All that crap was you trying real hard to use evidence to justify what you did, wasn't it!?"

"Uhh..."

"I knew it!"

Akio sighed loudly, burying his face in his hands. This was getting nowhere fast.

"Look, Ryuko, I know Tsumugu was out of control and what he did was wrong, but I thought you knew that we knew him? We were on a first name basis, after all."

"I'm not stupid, of course I realized that," Ryuko growled and stood, taking a step towards Akio. "But, what I *didn't* know was that the guy that tried to kill me is apparently one of your fucking drinking buddies!"

Ryuko punctuated her shout by throwing her scissor blade directly at Akio, purposefully missing his neck by inches as it embedded itself into one of the kitchen cabinets behind him. Akio flinched, but before he could recover Ryuko had pushed him back against the wall and next to her blade, all the while her stormy eyes boring holes into his.

"This seemed like the type of thing 'friends' tell each other, don't you think!?" Ryuko hissed, her hand tightening around the hilt of her blade by his neck. Her expression softened for only a moment, her hurt expression going unnoticed by Akio. "I may not know much about friendship, but I know enough to know that that wasn't okay."

Akio met Ryuko's glare despite their close proximity, his expression stern and unwavering.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Ryuko. I regret that, I really do. However, I believe actions speak louder than words, or lack thereof."

Akio narrowed his eyes, daring Ryuko to challenge him on this.

Ryuko scoffed, pulling her scissor blade out of the wall and shoving Akio back.

"Keep telling yourself that, but the fact of the matter is you still haven't told me anything. Am I your friend, or am I just some asset to you? You don't get to pick and choose!"

Aikuro watched the two closely, deciding to step in and take the heat off his brother.

"Don't be so angry; it's not Akio's fault. It was my decision to keep you in the dark. Once I'm convinced that you're someone we can trust, I'll tell you everything."

"Gah!" Ryuko shouted and kicked a stray book across the room out of anger. "I'm tired of hearing that shit from you two! If you won't be honest with me, then you can kiss my ass-"

" *Nudist Beach...* "

Ryuko stopped her rampage in a heartbeat, turning to face Aikuro and raising an eyebrow.

"Huh?"

"We're Nudist Beach!"

Ryuko looked at Akio with a blank expression.

"That's right," Akio agreed. "The name of our organization is Nudist Beach, created by your father, Dr. Isshin-"

"Are you two nuts?"

"It IS the name of our organization... Nudist..." Aikuro tilted his head upwards, letting his clothes fall off his body. "BEEEEACH!"

"... Forget it," Ryuko huffed and walked to the door. "It was stupid of me to expect a straight answer from you two."

"Ryuko?"

"Ryuko, wait a second," Akio called out and reached a hand out to stop her by grabbing onto one of her own. "It's not a joke. I know I've kept a lot from you, but I swear, Nudist Beach is the name of our organization."

"Yeah, right," Ryuko scoffed, wrenching her hand from Akio's. "It's one thing to not tell me anything, but it's another to lie my face."

"It's not a lie! Ryuko, I'm-"

"No, I get it! You want me to keep fighting so I can keep growing stronger. That's all you really want, right?"

Ryuko pushed open their door, pacing through it and slamming it shut on her way out.

"Sorry..." Akio finished with a sigh.

"But that really was our name..." Aikuro mumbled dejectedly. "Oh well, I guess it worked out in the end."

Akio lowered his head, his posture slumping. "Yeah, I guess so."

Aikuro eyed his brother worriedly, his brows knitting in concern.

"I'm sorry about what happened, Akio. Are you-"

"So, the week off right?" Akio asked, facing his brother with a complete emotionless expression.

"Uh," Aikuro blinked, taken back by the quick change in subject. "Yeah, if you don't mind."

"Alright," Akio nodded and walked towards his room. "I'm going to bed, then. Night."

Aikuro watched his brother walk out of the room, a feeling of guilt building in his chest. Was this his fault?

Maybe if he had handled this whole situation better, Akio could have lived a somewhat normal teenage life, despite his position at Nudist Beach. Aikuro felt guilty about that every day that went by.

Aikuro sighed and sat down on the couch, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. Maybe things would get better for Akio as the week went on...

... Or maybe he could do something.

Day One:

Akio's eyes fluttered open, the sun beams shooting in from the window forcing him awake. With a large yawn he sat forwards in his bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He glanced at the clock on his bed side table; 9:00 A.M. Right. He wasn't going to school this week.

Akio gave another yawn, moving to set his feet on the floor. It was going to be a long, uneventful day until Aikuro returned home from the Academy. He'd have to find something to do till then.

His eyes traveled across his room to where a cracked mirror stood. The cracks were numerous, but his reflection could still clearly be seen. His hands unconsciously traveled to his face, his fingers tracing the three large grooves that went down the right side.

Enough of that.

Putting on a plain white shirt and a pair of gym shorts, Akio walked out of his bedroom and into the living room. He wasn't particularly hungry, so he opted to brew a pot of coffee while he chewed on a piece of toast and read the newspaper. He didn't particularly care for the newspaper here, but reading material was reading material. Taking a seat on the couch, he began reading.

As expected, the newspaper was the same as always. Propaganda for the Kiryuins and the Academy.

Akio sighed and took a sip of his black coffee. What a surprise.

He took a small bite from his toast, looking around the apartment. What in the hell was he going to do for a week? He could work out some, he supposed. With all of the shit going on recently, he had cut back on his daily routine more than he had wanted.

Other than that, he could read, or he could go visit the Mankanshokus. He was a little hesitant on the latter, however. What, with his argument with Ryuko, he'd imagine things might be awkward if he showed up, and he really wasn't looking for another argument.

Akio sighed again, leaning back in his seat. It seemed that he'd be doing a lot of reading and working out this week. Set with that decision, Akio put down the newspaper, reaching for one of the stray books on the coffee table in front of him.

It was *The Hobbit*. Now, Akio wasn't that big of a fan of fantasy, but he had heard good things about this book. Might as well give it a try, after all.

The hours ticked by like seconds, and before he knew it, it was already early afternoon. The book was alright so far, but as he thought, fantasy just wasn't his favorite genre of literature.

Akio tossed his book back on the coffee table, trying to think up something he could do for the next few hours. Maybe he'd go outside for a little while and take a walk to rehabilitate his ankle some. It was still somewhat sore to walk on, but not too terrible. He could use the time to clear his head, too.

Coming to a decision, Akio rose and walked to the front door, grabbing a jacket and walking outside.

It was a nice day out; not too hot, not too cold. The sun was out in full force today, not a single cloud blocking its rays of light.

Akio pushed his hands into his pockets, walking through the streets of the slums. Even though school was still in session, the streets were as busy as they usually were. People were hustling to and fro,

either working or shopping for groceries. No one seemed to notice or care about the young man's presence.

It was refreshing. Even though so much had happened in the past few weeks, the world kept going on as it always did. It helped him gain some perspective on his own problems. Maybe things weren't as bad as he thought.

It was just one set back. It was just a few injuries. It was just a part of the role he was given in this world. People might not like the cards they had been dealt, but that didn't mean you should just throw out the whole hand. You make those cards work until you win or you lose. Folding was never an option for him.

Without realizing it, Akio found himself standing outside of the Mankanshoku household, but for a complete different reason. It seemed as if he hadn't talked to Mako or the others for weeks now, even though it had been only a few days. The Mankanshokus had been so kind to him, essentially nursing him back to full health. The least he could do was drop by and try to return the favor as best he could, his situation with Ryuko be damned.

Akio walked up to the door, knocking on its surface.

"Come on in, guys! It's unlocked!"

Akio tilted his head to the side, suspicious of the response but he opened it anyways. As he walked in, the sight that greeted him was unexpected, but at the same time, he should have expected something this ridiculous at this household.

Mataro sat cross-legged at the table in the dining room, a stack of pictures and a six pack of beer in front of him.

Akio's eyes bulged at the photos, as they all seemed to be photos of Ryuko as she slept in her pajamas. Of course Mataro would have those.

His eyes moved next to the beer, ready to ream Mataro a new one when he noticed that the words 'non-alcoholic' were written in very small print on the front label. Akio could let that one slide.

In fact, he was just going to let the whole thing slide. This was way above his pay grade.

"Oh, hey, Akio," Mataro greeted lazily, not surprised in the slightest.

"Hey, Mataro," Akio replied, glancing around the house. It was to be expected that no one would be here, but still, Akio felt a little deflated at that. He wouldn't have minded conversing with Mako or Mr. and Mrs. Mankanshoku. "Where is everyone?"

"Dad and Mom went out to go do some stuff that I don't care about, and Mako and Ryuko are still in class. Although, I heard they got out early because of some scheduled fight between Ryuko and some guy named Puzu, or something."

"Scheduled fight?" Akio asked with frown. So Ryuko was going up against one of the Elite Four? Sounds like she had her work cut out for her this week.

Oh, well. Akio was certain she'd do fine. Uzu had one huge weakness; his pride. He's so sure of himself and his 'special eyes,' there was no doubt that it would eventually be his downfall, and Ryuko was smart enough to exploit that confidence.

"Yeah," Mataro replied absently, eyeing the assortment of strange goods in front of him. "You... you aren't going to ask what I'm doing?"

"Nope."

"You're not even going to ask why I'm not in school?"

"No."

"Awesome! I knew I could count on you, boss!" Mataro grinned and grabbed a picture and one of the non-alcoholic beers, passing both of them to Akio like they were communion wafers. "Here! Help yourself!"

Akio eyed the offered 'treats', pursing his lips to keep from laughing outright.

"I'm good for right now, but thanks."

Mataro shrugged as if to say 'suit yourself,' then cracked open his drink and stared intently at the photo in his hand.

"So what are you doing here, anyways?" Mataro asked, never taking his eyes off of the photo.

"I thought I might see if I could return the favor of you guys helping me so much this past week."

"Return the favor, huh?"

Mataro grinned devilishly, his eyes darting to the pile of dirty laundry and the stack of dirty dishes.

"Well, I know it'd really help us out if someone did the laundry and cleaned the dishes."

"It would?"

Mataro nodded vehemently, keeping an innocent face.

"Well then, I'd be happy to help."

Akio rolled up the sleeves of his jacket, making his way towards the sink full of dirty dishes.

There could be worse ways to spend a day, he supposed.

Day Two:

BANG, BANG, BANG!

Akio glanced up from over the cover of his book and to the door that was now nearly shaking off its hinges.

"That's... strange..." Akio mumbled to himself. It was only noon. There really shouldn't be anyone knocking on his door at this time of day.

Before Akio could make up his mind on what to do, the door burst open, and in walked one very frantic looking Mako, carrying a very large stack of papers.

Akio shot up from his seat, his book falling to the ground. "Mako!?"

"Akio!"

Mako stumbled and fell to the ground, throwing her hands up in the air and losing all of the papers she was holding in the process.

"EEP! OH NO!" Mako screeched in terror, her hands like lightning as they darted all around grabbing her papers back up in a heartbeat. She stood back up, smiling brightly at Akio as if nothing had happened. "Hey, Akio! How are you? Where have you been? Are you sick? Are you alright? Am I going to get sick now, too?"

"Uh..." Akio blinked, caught off guard by the rapid fire of questions. "... I'm fine, I've taken the week off, no, I am not sick, yes, I am okay, and no, you won't get sick. Now then, what are you doing here? I didn't think you knew where I lived."

"Ryuko told me," Mako answered simply. "And I'm here because I need your help!"

"With?"

"With this!"

Mako dropped her stack of papers on the nearby coffee table.

Akio examined the papers, the words 'club president' jumping out at him. He turned back to Mako, frowning.

"You're the president of a club, now?"

"Yep," Mako nodded. "The Fight Club! Ryuko appointed me as president, but I don't know the first thing about paperwork, papers, or work! So I thought that you might be able to help me out, since you were a club president once."

Akio rubbed the back of his head, turning away.

"I don't know, Mako... I was never that cut out for it, which is why I quit in the first place. That type of power, it changes people, ya know?"

Akio didn't want to admit it, but even he got a little power drunk from his position as the Martial Arts president. He told Ryuko and Mako that he quit because of moral reasons, which was partly true, but one of the main reasons was that he didn't like how it changed him. He became more vain, more selfish, and basically an asshole. Thankfully, Aikuro slapped some sense into him, and he ended up quitting. He loved his brother for that.

"There's nothing to worry about, Akio. I swear, it won't change anything. I just want to be able to help my family as they helped me. I want to give them a life that's too good to be true; to make their eyes twinkle in wonder and amazement when they wake up every morning. I want them all to have comfortable lives, without having to worry about where our next meal is coming from."

Mako lowered her head, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Is that too much to ask?"

Akio's expression softened and he placed a hand on Mako's shoulder, giving it a reaffirming squeeze.

Of all the people in the world, Akio would guess that the Mankanshokus would be the last to fall to greed.

"No. No, that isn't too much to ask."

"Then..." Mako raised her head to look hopefully at Akio. "You'll help?"

"I'd love to," Akio smiled.

"Yay!"

Mako jumped up and down clapping her hands while spinning in a circle.

"I knew you'd help! I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!"

"Yes, well," Akio sat down on the couch, motioning for Mako to do the same. "First things first: club presidents are to submit a club activity log every Friday. Now, you still have a few days, so we'll set that aside for now."

Akio pushed aside a stack of the papers.

"Since you're a new club, we should focus on the club room request form, club roster, and the family member list. I also advise you that you fill out the expense forms now. They're not due until the end of the month, but if you get it done early you'll have a better reputation, which can really help you in the long run."

Akio grabbed several papers from the stack and handed it to Mako, who had now taken a seat down next to him.

"Just fill those out and turn them in at Club President Council meetings that take place every day at seven in the morning. They

won't really get on you about it until around Friday, but the sooner you turn them in the better."

Mako stared dumbly at the papers in front of her, the pen she had in her hand shaking slightly. She looked up at Akio with large, hopeful eyes.

"Would you mind helping me fill them out?"

"I... suppose I can."

"Yay!" Mako giggled and clapped her hands together, passing Akio half of the papers and a pen.

With that settled, Mako set to work, her tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth as she scribbled on the first paper in front of her. A lighthearted tune escaped her throat, the scratching of her pen almost in perfect sync with her melody.

Akio grinned.

This wasn't so bad, after all.

Day Five:

Akio pushed open the door, huffing and puffing as several beads of sweat traveled down his face.

"Aikuro! I'm home!"

Akio walked into the kitchen, grabbing a nearby towel and wiping the sweat from his face, then poured himself a large glass of water and downing it in one gulp.

His day had been as normal as the past two. He had woken up early, read some from his book, then went out and exercised. It had started out as just walking, but as the week progressed, he had found it

easier and easier to run on it. His ankle was still a little sore and tender, but it wasn't too bad now.

Akio glanced around the empty apartment. Weird. He should have answered by now. School would be out already.

"Aikuro?"

Akio walked from the kitchen to the living room, stopping when a sheet of paper with his name on it caught his eye.

Akio,

I'll be out for a few hours, so would you mind starting dinner? Go ahead and get started. By the time I'm finished, dinner should be ready to go.

I'd really appreciate it.

Sincerely, Aikuro

P.S. Make it something fancy. I'm feeling fancy tonight, aren't you?

Akio scoffed. 'Feeling fancy,' huh? What the hell did that even mean?

Grumbling to himself, Akio walked over to their small refrigerator, opening it up to examine its contents.

"Let's see..."

Seeing as his brother wanted something 'fancy,' the best he could do was chicken with some fried rice and shredded cabbage, with some miso soup to go along with it. That wouldn't be too bad.

Turning on the oven and getting out the necessary ingredients, Akio began to work. It had been a while since he had cooked, but he didn't mind the job itself. In fact, he actually enjoyed it somewhat.

Getting into the cooking mode, Akio whistled a tune to himself as he worked, cooking the chicken and the rice at the same time. It really wouldn't take him that long to finish, so why Aikuro had told him to go ahead and get started on it if he was going to be a few hours late was beyond him.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

Akio blinked a few times, the sound eventually registering in his ears as a knocking coming from the front door.

"Really? Again?"

Screw it.

"Come in!" Akio called out, not leaving his post at the oven.

He heard the door open and close, followed by footsteps coming towards him.

"Wow. I didn't think you could actually cook, and yet here you are, slaving away."

Akio spun around on his heel, nearly dropping his cooking utensil in the process.

Ryuko stood behind him, her arms crossed as she watched Akio with a bemused expression. She wore Senketsu as she always did, but that was no real surprise.

"Ryuko!? What are you doing here?"

Ryuko rose an eyebrow. "You invited me, remember? I only got your message an hour ago, so I'm glad I'm not too late."

"Invited? Message?"

"Uh... yeah? You left a note saying you'd cook me dinner as a way of apologizing for the other day. Do you really not remember?"

Akio blinked, ready to speak up when a thought hit him.

'Make it something fancy. I'm feeling fancy tonight, aren't you?'

Akio fought back a grin and turned back to his cooking.

Aikuro... you cheeky bastard.

"Yeah, of course I remember leaving it," Akio replied calmly, seasoning the chicken. "I just didn't think you'd come."

"Psh, I never turn down free food."

Ryuko walked over to the living room, plopping down on the couch and kicking her feet up, letting her arms drape over the back of it.

"Besides, I'm tired of eating alone."

Akio glanced back over his shoulder, but decided not to respond to that. He'd wait till dinner was done for the real conversations to begin.

"Here you are," Akio said as he placed a steaming hot plate of food in front of Ryuko, followed by a cup of miso soup.

Ryuko nodded her thanks, breaking apart her chopsticks and digging in.

Akio grabbed his own plate of food, sitting down next to Ryuko on the couch. It only made logical sense. It was the only seat in the place with an actual table in front of it.

"This isn't half bad," Ryuko remarked, taking a bite of chicken and shredded cabbage.

"Thanks," Akio smirked, taking his own bite of food.

The two ate in an awkward silence, the only audible sound being their chopsticks scrapping against the glass plates and the chewing of their food.

Well. Might as well test the waters with the Fight Club. He could probably find out how the fight with Uzu went from Aikuro anyhow.

"So, how is the Fight Club going?"

Ryuko looked up from her plate, giving Akio a surprised look.

"How'd you know about that? You've been gone, like, the entire week."

"Mako came by the other day asking for help on the paper work."

"Ah," Ryuko nodded, her surprised expression quickly turning into one of sadness. "Yeah, it's going great."

"Great?" Akio quirked an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Ryuko replied absently, poking her food with her chopsticks. "Mako's done a great job as president. So great that we even made it up into one of those dumb Two Star mansions."

"You don't seem that happy about it," Akio noted.

"No, I am. Everyone finally gets to live the luxurious life they really deserve. After all the crap they've done for me, If I have to eat alone now and fight every day, so be it. As long as they're happy," Ryuko said and sighed. "I just wasn't expecting them all to change this much..."

Akio blinked.

Oh, so that's it? Damn, he shouldn't have agreed to help Mako in the first place. He didn't expect the Mankanshokus to succumb to the power of wealth and greed.

"... It sounds to me like you should quit."

Ryuko looked up from her plate. "Huh?"

"You should quit," Akio repeated firmly, his eyes meeting hers. "I think all of you would be happier that way."

Ryuko stared dumbly at him, not fully understanding.

"What do you mean?"

"Things would be much better for all of you if you went back to the slums. Money and power can change people, usually for the worse. I doubt the Mankanshokus would be happy about this if they really realized how much it's affected them. I think you know this as well as I do."

"I don't know..." Ryuko replied softly, looking back down to her plate.

"Well, ultimately it's up to you. It really isn't my place to tell you what to do, as much as I might like to," Akio said, smirking. "If you honestly think things are better up in that Two Star mansion, then by all means, stay. Just know that there are other ways to make the people you care about happy than just money and power."

"Hmmm."

Ryuko took another bite of food, chewing slowly as she thought over Akio's words.

"Where have you been all week, anyways?" Ryuko asked, glancing at Akio as she ate.

"Eh. Aikuro told me I should take the week off so things could cool off," Akio responded, patting his still wrapped ankle. "What, with everything going on recently things have gotten a little hectic. I couldn't fault him for wanting me to lay low for a little while."

"Makes sense," Ryuko nodded. Honestly, she was worried it might have been her fault, even if that might have been a rather conceited thought.

The two fell into another silence, however this one was much more comfortable.

Akio cleared his throat and set down his chopsticks. It was time to get on with what he really wanted to say.

Now, neither one of them were pushovers. When push came to shove, neither Ryuko nor Akio would back down from what they felt was true or right. However, that didn't mean that Akio wanted to lose one of the few friends he had. He'd also be lying if he said he didn't feel a little guilty about what happened the other day, but then again, he really was stuck between a rock and a hard place. First of all, he had his position within Nudist Beach to think of, but he also really valued Ryuko as a friend, even if they had only known each other for about a month.

"Look, about the other day..."

"Yes?" Ryuko lifted her head to look at him fully.

Akio wouldn't like to admit it, but he really was a rather proud man. He never liked to admit defeat, and occasionally that could land him in some sticky situations. He was getting better at it; or so he thought. Clearly Ryuko did not approve of his apology the other day.

Akio exhaled slowly and spoke up. "I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to keep you in the dark like I have, but you must understand, it wasn't-"

"-Your choice. Yeah, I got it."

Akio turned to look at her, expecting an angry expression, but instead Ryuko looked more apologetic than upset.

"I got a little too hot headed the other day, and it didn't really occur to me that there are some things you guys can't tell me. Besides, just because we're friends doesn't mean you have to tell me everything."

Akio pursed his lips and turned back to his plate of food, staring at it absently. For some reason, he didn't like that. They were friends, so why couldn't he entrust her with such secret information?

A light bulb flickered on in his head. He might not be able to tell her about the workings of Nudist Beach, but there was other things he could share.

Clearing his throat, he spoke up once more.

"... I like to dance."

Akio's admission caught Ryuko off guard, causing her to drop her chopsticks and choke on her food. She looked at him with big, unblinking eyes.

"Excuse me?"

"Secretly, I really enjoy dancing," Akio replied nonchalantly, taking a bite of his food. "My mother was a dance instructor, and more often than not I was her test subject. It was fun. I guess you could say I never quit, even after I moved out."

"Wait, wait just a second," Ryuko snickered, covering her mouth with her hand to keep from laughing outright. "You're telling me that you're secretly a ballerina?"

"No, idiot," Akio replied hotly. "My mother taught ballroom and folk dances. There are other dances than ballet, you know."

"..."

"..."

"PFFFT HAHAHA!"

Ryuko threw her head back and laughed, placing her hands on her stomach as the laughter racked her body.

"Oh my god!" Ryuko screeched and wiped a stray tear from her eye. "When you started talking, I thought you were going to go all serious on me, but dancing? Really? You're shitting me!"

"No, I am not 'shitting' you... And I didn't think it was *that* funny."

"Hey! Hey! I have an idea!" Ryuko bit back another fit of laughter, punching Akio lightly in the arm as she talked. "W-why don't you go get your tutu and do a little strutting for me! I always like a little show with dinner!"

Ryuko found her joke extremely hilarious, causing her to fall from the couch and to the floor, kicking the air and rolling around as she laughed uncontrollably.

"HAHAHA! OH, GOD! D-DANCING! YOU'RE SUCH A PUSS!"

"Yeah, yeah, muck it up," Akio mumbled, a slight smile gracing his lips as well. "I'm glad you find my secret so funny."

"Heh... Funny? No, no, Akio, it's downright hilarious."

Ryuko wheezed a few more times as she finally composed herself, her face flushed and eyes filled with tears of mirth. She picked herself up off the floor and sat back down on the couch.

"You know what?"

Akio sighed and placed his head in his hands. This ought to be good.

"What?"

"You'll make an excellent housewife some day, Akio. Apology accepted."

Author's Notes:

So there you have it! Like I said, basically character interactions and character developments on the side of Akio. He starts to understand where to draw the line between work and his social life, and getting more accustomed to it all.

I had to write some more Mako and Mataro in to. The fearsome duo wasn't getting enough screen time (even though Mako didn't get a huge amount here...).

I hope you guys liked it, and thanks for reading! Review if you want to, but it's not a requirement :)

Until next time!

Paralogue - What Are You Fighting for?

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to a little side installment of Before My Body is Dry!

So, a few days ago, I posted a full chapter, Interlude. Now, think of this one as a little side chapter. If chapter 8 was a full video game, think of this chapter as the DLC to it.

This chapter will also stray a little bit away from Akio's POV. You'll see what I mean.

As expected, this chapter will be pretty short. Only like 2000 words. But, it will cover the end of the Fight Club episode, as well as some other things, like working on Akio's character a little bit.

Plus, the moment between Mako and Ryuko in this episode might be the most important of their relationship, so I really wanted to write a little bit of it.

So, read this little bit, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

Ryuko took blow after blow from Mako, not even trying to stop them. Each fist hit her like a truck, and Mako showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. But she didn't care. She would never strike back against Mako.

The barrage never ended. This was how the fight had played out. Mako would swing and swing, and Ryuko would sit and take it. The fight had lasted for hours, and as soon as they knew it, morning became afternoon and the sun had begun to set.

Mako swung hard, popping Ryuko in the chin and knocking her across the makeshift stadium in the Academy's courtyard.

Ryuko hit the ground with a thud. She struggled to stand, but her will proved stronger than Mako's punches. She wouldn't bow down to Mako, or Satsuki for that matter.

"It's over!"

Mako ran at her from across the arena, raising her fist with the 'Mako' brass knuckles to deliver the final blow.

Ryuko watched her unblinking, a slight smile on her face as her best friend charged towards her.

"GET HER!"

The Mankanshoku family cheered from their seats in the bleachers, all too excited at the turn of events. If Mako won, that meant that they could keep their rich and luxurious life style. Who wouldn't want that?

Within a few feet from each other, Mako rose her fist, prepared to finish her best friend once and for all.

"... Heh."

Mako gasped at Ryuko's soft chuckle, stopping dead in her tracks.

The Mankanshokus were just as surprised, but for different reasons. Why did her daughter stop? With a single punch, she would have secured their position as one of the elite?

Satsuki watched on with an expressionless face, not showing a hint of emotion from the change of events.

"W-why?"

Mako fell to her knees, sniffing as tears began to run from her eyes, forming a puddle beneath her face.

"Why aren't you stopping me!?" Mako cried. "If I keep this up, Ryuko's going to die! Dad, Mom, Akio, why aren't you trying to stop me!? And you call yourselves parents, friends?"

"Y-you're mad at us?" Mr. Mankanshoku stammered. He looked around for Akio for backup, but he wasn't even there. In fact, he hadn't even been there since the fight started.

"When I became club president and our lives improved, I thought we had a sparkle in our eyes. I thought our whole family was glowing. But we weren't... Akio even warned me, but I didn't listen. It was just a nasty glint in our eyes! We were just being blinded by greed. It wasn't a twinkle, it was a dazzling glimmer of a glint!"

Mako lowered her head, letting the tears fall from her eyes and drop to the ground, adding to the already large pool beneath her.

"We're the worst!" Mako shouted, raising her fist and bringing it to the ground. "Dad and all you guys, too! And so am I!"

Mako's fist slammed into the ground, causing the dirt surface to crack and explode. The explosion rocked the arena, blowing away the bleachers and the Elite Four, but leaving Satsuki unfazed atop her tower. The punch left a giant crater in its wake, Ryuko and Mako being its only inhabitants.

"Ooh..." Mako gasped and looked around, surprised by her own strength.

"I guess this is the real power of your Goku Uniform, Mako."

Mako tilted her head to the side. "Huh?"

"You never attacked me all out," Ryuko continued, planting her scissor in the ground to lean against it.

"I'm s-sorry," Mako sniffled, closing her eyes in shame. Her words did more damage to Mako than she could ever do to Ryuko, and she completely, utterly deserved it. "I'm so sorry, Ryuko!"

Ryuko smiled. "Take that silly thing off."

"Yeah!" Mako rubbed her wrists into her eyes, drying up the tears before going into one of her classic rants.

"As of today, the Fight Club is disbanded! Mako Mankanshoku will go back to being a No Star!"

"Kiryuin!" Ryuko shouted up at the tower of the Academy immediately after Mako had finished. "Humans aren't as weak as they say you are! People can suppress their desires through sheer willpower!"

Mako nodded with Ryuko's statement, pulling off her Goku Uniform and throwing it into the air.

"Ryuko, do it!"

"With pleasure!"

Ryuko sprung in to the air, twisting to bring her sword around to slash through Mako's Goku Uniform.

"Finishing move: Sen-I-Soshitsu!"

The outfit exploded into a burst of blue and yellow light, very similar to that of fireworks. The crowd that watched the fight watched the sky in awe, amazed by the beautiful light show. Shades of green, purple, blue, and yellow filled the sky, painting it in a beautiful glow.

Ryuko and Mako watched as the explosions color the sky in a comfortable silence, enjoying the moment as true sisters would.

"GAHHHHH!"

The cry of Mr. Mankanshoku pulled the two away from the explosions, turning to face the far side of the crater as the Mankanshoku family barreled towards them.

"We're really sorry!"

"I, Barazo Mankanshoku, will never live this down!" Mr. Mankanshoku yelled as he ripped his fancy clothes from his body.

"I'll never act so disgracefully ever again!" Mrs. Mankanshoku agreed as she did the same.

"I'm so ashamed, letting my desires get the better of me!" Mataro cried, ripping off his own clothes.

Ryuko smiled at the silly family racing towards her, her smile faltering slightly when she noticed something odd.

Akio wasn't there. They had come here together, and yet, he was nowhere to be seen...

Satsuki turned away from her perch on the Academy tower, a slight smirk gracing her lips after witnessing the scene below.

"You have pretty lackluster guards, Lady Satsuki."

A voice broke out among the tower's walkway, stopping her in her tracks. There, standing at the opposite end of the walkway, was a single man. He wore a black zip up hoodie with a white shirt underneath, along with a pair of beat up blue jeans. His brown hair billowed in the wind, his green eyes staring menacingly at her.

However, the feature that stood out most to her was the three jagged lines that ran across the right side of his face. The scars glinted in the dying sunlight, taking away from the other features of his face.

"Takahiro. I can't say I was expecting to see you here," Satsuki answered calmly, her hand moving to the hilt of her sheathed sword. "And yet, it seems that I should have."

Akio snorted, taking a single step closer to the class president.

"To be honest, neither was I, but here I am. Your Elite Four really isn't that observant, you know. They were so engrossed in the fight down below that they failed to notice a stray student enter the Academy."

Akio grinned at Satsuki, but it was anything but friendly. Pure, unadulterated hatred shone brightly in his eyes, matching Satsuki's completely neutral expression.

"What is it that you want, Takahiro?" Satsuki said, dropping all pretenses of formality. They were alone, after all. "You know as well as I do that I can kill you where you stand."

Akio kept up his glare, not falling for Satsuki's bait. He continued walking towards Satsuki, not backing down in the slightest; even if he was far out matched by the Kamui wearer.

"You run this city as if you were its queen, watching as everything goes to hell and not even batting an eyelash to help anyone. You're cold, Kiryuin. Heartless. There was once a time where I thought that you might have an ounce of humanity left in that icy heart of yours, but I was mistaken."

Akio stopped in front of Satsuki, only a few feet from her.

"Slaves to the Academy I have created... Truly, they are pigs in human clothing, pigs that must be tamed by force..." Akio quoted her, frowning slightly. "You disgust me."

Satsuki didn't budge an inch, taking Akio's words in stride.

"The only thing you care about is power and your position in this world. You truly are the antithesis to what I stand for, Kiryuin."

"Interesting, because if I remember correctly you once succumbed to the power of wealth and greed as well. Are you saying that you're better than those down there?"

Akio's nostrils flared at her statement, but he kept his cool. She wasn't wrong, after all.

"You used my friends as pawns in your petty little games," Akio spat, ignoring her comment, his fists clenching at his side. "Frankly, I don't care what your plan is. For all I know, you could be helping them out by testing their resolve, but still, it doesn't matter."

Satsuki's eyebrows rose ever so slightly, going unnoticed by Akio.

"If you ever, ever, pull the same stunt that you did today..." Akio paused, his voice dropping to a whisper as his green eyes bore holes into hers. "I *will* stop you. Before my body is dry, with every ounce of my being, I will bring you down. Even if I have to go down in the process, I will stop you. I swear it."

A gust of wind kicked up at their high altitude, blowing the two's hair back and forth.

"So, the fly fancies himself a lion?" Satsuki smirked, removing her hand from the hilt of her blade. "You talk strongly, Takahiro, but the fact of the matter is that you are just as weak and pathetic as the rest of those pigs down below. You couldn't possibly hope to stand up against me."

Akio chuckled and shook his head, as if he had been expecting the conversation to go down this road all along.

"Yes, but you underestimate the underdog, Kiryuin. Mako's rejection of your system was prove enough of that."

Akio raised his arms, motioning to the surrounding area beside them.

"And besides, I got here without anyone noticing me. Who's to say I couldn't do it again?"

"And who's to say I won't tell anyone else about what happened here today?" Satsuki countered. "I could have the whole Academy out for your blood."

"True, but you won't. It's just not in your nature," Akio smirked knowingly. "Warning others about me would be an admission of your defeat; of your worry of me. Are you really that weak, Kiryuin? So weak that you're afraid of a lowly No Star?"

"You're treading on thin ice, Takahiro."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

Akio turned to walk to the nearby ledge, stopping when Satsuki addressed him one last time. There was one last thing she was genuinely curious about.

"Would you really deprive Matoi of the answers she seeks? You know that I'm the only one that can provide it."

Akio glanced over the side of the tower, his eyes staring listlessly at the ground below.

"Who's to say that the answer that she seeks is not the one that I seek as well? Besides, if she kicks your ass it's all the same to me. That's what I'm hoping for, anyway."

And with that, Akio jumped over the side, disappearing as quickly as he had appeared.

Author's Notes:

So you can kind of see why I wanted to write this little bit. I had this moment between Akio and Satsuki in my mind for a while

now, and I really wanted to write it down.

As I continue writing this story, Akio's relationship with Satsuki really intrigues me. They fight for very different reasons (or so he thinks), yet they are very, very similar. Both are cool, collected, and confident. Satsuki really could be the antithesis of Akio, as she is fighting for power and strength, while Akio has moved from fighting for Nudist Beach to fighting for his friends, and in this chapter, you really see how far he is willing to go for his friends. But the thing is, is that they both fight for what they believe is right. Two peas in a pod.

Believe you me when I say that Akio and Satsuki will have some more moments later on down the road.

Welp, I hope you guys enjoyed this short chapter! It was pretty intense, compared to the last one. The next one should be churned out in a couple of days, but I really wanted to kick this one out soon after Interludes release.

Once again, thanks for reading, and until next time!

The Pawn's Gambit, Part I

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the first part of the ninth chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

This chapter wasn't meant to be a two parter, but I had gotten to like word 8000 and decided maybe I should break them up in to two. I apologize for the longish wait, but like I said, this one was a lot longer than I anticipated. I forgot how much important stuff happened in the episode that this chapter takes place in.

This first part will be a bit less intense, while the second part will have a fair bit more action in it.

The next part should come out in a few days, so worry not friends!

Sit back, relax, and enjoy!

Edit: Actually, now that I think about it, this will end up probably being a three parter!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

The students of Honnouji Academy were huddled together in the school's courtyard, anxiously awaiting Satsuki's supposedly important announcement; that is, everyone except Akio, Ryuko, and Mako.

"Just what the hell are we doing out here?"

"You heard her," Akio answered Ryuko with a hushed whisper.
"Apparently our Lady Satsuki has an announcement for us."

Akio stood straight with his arms crossed, his eyes trained on the giant tower of the Academy. They had been standing here for hours, and to be frank, he was more than ready to hear what scheme Satsuki had thought up this time.

Ryuko stood next to him in a similar position, however her eyes were darting to and fro, watching and analyzing the crowd around them. More than a third of these students had been out for her head a day earlier. She had to be on guard at all times.

Mako stood next to Ryuko, her head leaning against her shoulder as she fell fast asleep. In her mind, this wasn't very important.

A bright light shone at the top of the Academy's tower, signaling Satsuki's approach.

Satsuki walked to the edge of the tower, tapping the hilt of her sword on its surface. The simple, yet surprisingly loud sound echoed throughout the courtyard, reaching everyone's ears and signaling for them to quiet down.

"Today, I am giving the Honnouji Student Council System a fresh start!" Satsuki began, getting straight down to business. "ALL students have the right to attack other students! Secret meetings, scheming, backstabbing, anything goes!"

Akio ground his teeth. He did *not* like this woman. Satsuki clearly had no reservations about causing complete and utter chaos, just so long as she benefited in the end. He couldn't, and wouldn't, stand for this. Unfortunately, what could he do? He couldn't exactly go toe-to-toe with her like Ryuko could.

He clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms. There must be something he could do... He was sick and tired of not being able to stack up to his enemies.

Ryuko apparently had the same hatred for her running through her mind, as Akio could audibly hear her teeth grounding inside of her

mouth.

"Seven days from now, reach the schoolyard alive! And then, use your strength to lay claim to your social standing once again! This shall be Honnouji Academy's first Naturals Election!"

Akio shifted his gaze to the students around him, who all appeared to be fidgeting in place at the news. It seems like he wasn't the only one who realized where this would inevitably end up.

"Naturals Election?" Ryuko mumbled.

"This won't end well..." Akio whispered back.

"In this election, you will not be choosing some candidate! You will be choosing yourself!" Satsuki continued, as stoic as ever. "Your standing! Your strength! Your way of life!"

The crowd around the three murmured, everyone glancing around suspiciously at their neighbors. It appears that Satsuki had accomplished what she had set out for. Everyone was already at odds with each other.

So much for that 'friendly school environment.'

"At 8:30 A.M., seven days from now, a Sudden Death Runoff Election will be held with the survivors who arrive in this schoolyard. Fight one another! Emerge victorious! And I will grant you your Goku Uniforms anew!"

Satsuki slammed the hilt of her sword on the ground, the clanging sound ringing in the ear of every student in the courtyard.

"And now, fellow comrades of Honnouji Academy... FIGHT!"

The giant crowd of students stood stock-still, no one daring to move an inch. Everyone knew that the second someone even twitched, the fighting would begin in earnest. Every student held their breath,

glancing around nervously as they waited for someone to make the first move.

"What do we do?" Ryuko whispered out of the corner of her mouth, watching the crowd warily. "The minute someone-"

Akio turned to the unknown student beside him, decking him straight in the face and knocking him to the ground.

"Sorry!"

The crowd around him watched dumbly as the body fell to the ground, the breath catching in everyone's throats. Their surprise didn't last long, however.

The minute the student's body touched the ground, fighting broke out everywhere. Thousands of fists were thrown, kicks delivered, knives brandished, lives threatened. It took no time at all for the fighting to begin, with each and every participant out for blood.

"RUN!" Akio shouted, grabbing Ryuko and Mako by their hands and running full steam towards the entrance to the Academy.

"THAT WAS YOUR PLAN!?" Ryuko shouted, stumbling a little bit but able to keep up with Akio's rapid movements.

"IT WORKED, DIDN'T IT!?"

Well, he wasn't exactly wrong. With the commotion of the fighting, Akio, Ryuko, and Mako were able to make their way half way through the huge crowd before some people took notice of them.

"Hey, that's the transfer student!"

"If I can beat her, Lady Satsuki will love me!"

"Not if I get there first, you dumb son of a bitch!"

The crowd fanned out and circled around the trio, slowly stepping forwards and cracking their knuckles menacingly.

Ryuko grinned, her hand moving to the pin on her wrist.

"Heh, if it's a fight they want, it's a fight-"

Akio pulled a small canister out of his pocket and pulled its pin, throwing it on the ground in front of him.

Ryuko recognized it immediately. It was the same type of smoke grenade that Tsumugu had used on her.

BOOM!

The grenade exploded with a thunderous sound, sending a cloud of smoke into the air and masking the trio's figures.

The crowd erupted into a fit of coughs, covering their mouths with their arms to avoid inhaling the smoke.

"Where'd they go?"

"I can't see shit!"

Akio grabbed back onto the girls' hands, pulling them towards the general area of the Academy, pushing aside any confused students on the way.

Under the cover of the smoke cloud, the three made it inside of the Academy without any other interruptions. Thankfully, the fighting was still confined to the courtyard, not yet making it to inside the Academy itself.

The three stumbled inside of the Academy doors, all of them leaning on their knees to catch their breaths.

"What the hell was that?" Ryuko asked indignantly. "I could've taken them easily! Please tell me you're honestly not worrying that much

about me!"

"It has nothing to do with worrying about you," Akio replied, straightening his back and meeting Ryuko's eyes. "About half of those students out there are No Stars, fighting tooth and nail to get just a tiny bit ahead in the harsh environment that Kiryuin has created. They have it bad enough as it is, and they certainly don't need you beating on them. I feel guilty enough that I had to."

Ryuko's agitated expression fizzled out as quickly as it had appeared. Well, now she felt like a jerk.

"Come on," Akio said and walked towards the nearby stair well. "Let's get to Aikuro's room."

Akio, Ryuko, and Aikuro watched on as a giant, red force field enveloped the giant tower of the Academy, protecting it in its embrace. Mako, on the other hand, was fast asleep while she stood, which Akio had previously thought was impossible, but he was apparently wrong in that aspect.

"They're circulating finely chopped Life Fibers at a speed of a hundred meters a second," Aikuro mumbled, pushing his glasses up with his finger. "Any and all attacks are neutralized by that barrier. It would probably be difficult to breach even with Senketsu's power. "

Akio frowned and turned his attention to the courtyard below. The crowd of students were still engaged in an all out brawl, with no signs of stopping. The sight sickened him to his core.

He dug his fingers into the windowsill, a growl nearly escaping his throat. They deserved better than this. They shouldn't have to fight their fellow students and friends just to get ahead. It was despicable.

"Damn, I was thinking this was my chance to challenge her directly. She whips everybody into a frenzy and then sits behind an

impenetrable shield?" Ryuko said, punctuating her words by slamming her fist onto the windowsill. "Coward."

"It's probably the other way around. She's ruled absolutely here, and by sequestering herself, she's causing a state of anarchy within the Academy. See?"

Ryuko glanced at the fight down below, sighing.

"I swear, I'm so sick of her..."

"You're not the only one, I assure you," Aikuro grumbled.

Akio turned his head to the giant tower that loomed over them.

"Cleansing the Academy by fire, huh?"

A few hours later, Akio found himself out behind the apartment complex, fighting fiercely with a punching bag. He had set up this punching bag here a little over a year ago, specifically for this type of occasion. If he didn't practice every once and while, he'd grow rusty.

Akio slammed his fist into the punching bag, resulting in a very satisfying thud sound. He threw several more fists at the bag, sending it back and almost off of the hook it hung on.

Akio took a moment to breathe and wipe the sweat out of his eyes. This was more like it. He hadn't been able to actually practice for weeks, no doubt because of a certain transfer student and a certain fake teacher taking up most of his time. Not that it was really their fault. It was just the way things played out sometimes.

He took a step back and kicked at the bag, followed by two quick jabs, then another kick from his other side. The beads of sweat fell from his body as he attacked, the little droplets falling on to his bare chest.

It felt good. It was vindication of his hard work. After the day he had, it felt good to let out some of his pent up aggression.

He stepped back, then immediately pounced forwards, delivering a barrage of punches on the bag, finally knocking it off of its hook and to the ground.

Akio sighed and walked over to the bag, picking it up and placing it back on its hook.

Oh, he had a plan for this 'Naturals Election' alright. He was going to prove to the precious Lady that her actions were wrong, and that her system was faulty. To do that, he had to train harder, and to accomplish more. He might have been a member of Nudist Beach, but he was still a citizen of Honnou City. The people here deserved more. So much more. If Akio could help them in any way, he would. They deserved to be treated equally, not like lab rats.

Maybe Ryuko's stubbornness was starting to rub off on him. It sure felt that way.

He knew that he had to do something. He was tired of being useless. Aikuro essentially singlehandedly ran Nudist Beach, Ryuko had the strength to possibly bring the Kiryuin administration down to its knees, and hell, even Mako played her part. If it weren't for her, it was a very real possibility that Ryuko would be far worse off.

But what had he done so far?

He saved Ryuko's life a few times.

He recovered some information about the Academy's sewing club, which he paid dearly for, but that was about it. Was he really pulling his weight?

Akio growled and delivered a single punch to the bag, putting all of his pent up emotion in to that single strike.

The bag shook heavily on its hook, threatening to fall off once more had Akio not grabbed it and steadied it before it could.

"Hey there, Rocky. Nice punch."

Akio turned around to face his new guest. Or should he say guests.

Ryuko stood behind him with her arms crossed, smirking at the sweaty Akio. Mako stood beside her, her finger on her chin as she glanced around curiously. Akio's workout area seemed to be of great interest to her.

"You've seen those movies?"

"Who hasn't?" Ryuko shrugged and tried to appear aloof, however her gaze lingering slightly on his bare chest. "Get dressed. We're heading out."

"You sure?" Akio grinned, placing his hands on his hips. "It seems that you wouldn't mind if I went shirtless."

"S-shut up," Ryuko growled, however the slight blush that tinged her cheeks subtracted from her fierce expression. "I'm just praying that you didn't inherit your brother's desire to undress at every possible chance."

"Well, considering the fact that we're not related by blood, I highly doubt it. Don't you ever pay attention in class? Genetics are a thing, you know."

"Stow it, smart-ass. Now put a shirt on and meet us out front."

Ryuko huffed and walked away with Mako following closely behind.

Akio grinned even wider, pulling on the plain white shirt he had discarded and then followed closely behind them. Maybe the company of his friends was just what he needed.

"So, where are we going?" Akio asked once he made it out to the front of the building, where Ryuko and Mako were already waiting somewhat patiently for him as they stood beside a moped.

"We were planning on just tootling around, so Ryuko thought we should invite you to come with us!" Mako answered before Ryuko could.

Ryuko turned to her best friend, ready to smack her upside the head when Akio spoke up.

"I'd love to. Sounds like fun."

"Yeah, well," Ryuko scratched the back of her head sheepishly and motioned to the scooter with the other hand. "Let's get going. We don't have all day."

Akio narrowed his eyes at the scooter. It was a *scooter*. How the hell would three people ride that?

"Uh... How? I really doubt we could all fit on that thing."

"You could sit in Ryuko's lap!" Mako exclaimed, turning to her friend. "Right, Ryuko?"

"What? No! Hell no!"

"Yeah, that sounds pretty dangerous," Akio agreed, nodding sagely. "Let me just borrow my brother's car. It'd be a lot simpler."

Ryuko blinked. "He has a car?"

"Yeah, he actually has-" Akio bit his tongue. Aikuro actually had two cars. One was his nice, shiny Nudist Beach car, while the other was a shitty, rundown Volkswagen. "One car. Just one. How do you think he gets to school every day?"

Akio's near slip-up went unnoticed by Mako, but Ryuko caught it and rose an eyebrow in question.

Akio ignored it and pulled a key out of his pocket then pointed to a crappy looking Volkswagen across the street.

"There she blows."

It really was crappy looking. In general, it looked sort of like the Scooby Doo Mystery Van, but a much more shitty version without the famous design. The white paint that coated it was chipping off, one of the headlights was broken, and one of the tires looked suspiciously flat. But, it ran, and that's all that mattered.

"Your brother doesn't mind?" Mako asked tentatively.

"He could care less," Akio replied, walking towards the beat up vehicle. "Go ahead and get in."

Mako and Ryuko shared a look and shrugged, following Akio close behind. He was right, after all. It'd be a lot easier to take the van than Mr. Mankanshoku's dinky little scooter.

Akio climbed into the driver's seat, while Mako and Ryuko climbed into the back seat. Putting his key in the ignition, he twisted it, revving the engine a couple times to make sure it could actually run. It was disturbingly loud, but it would do.

"You're not going to drive like last time, right?" Ryuko asked hesitantly, making sure to buckle her seat belt.

"Please."

And that was all Akio was going to say on the matter.

So the three set out, Ryuko giving Akio directions while he purposefully went twenty miles over the speed limit with the windows rolled down, letting the wind blow through his hair. It wasn't like there were any other cars on the road, or any police cars for that matter. If breaking the law didn't take place on Academy grounds, it was pretty much fine.

Besides, he enjoyed it.

Mako seemed to have the same sentiment as he did, as she had her own window rolled down and her head pushed out of it, her cheeks and tongue flapping in the wind like a dog.

Akio placed his elbow on the car door, resting his chin in his hand as he drove. The sun was beginning to set, painting the sky in an orange tint. It really was a beautiful day for a drive.

"Aren't you gonna fight in the election?" Ryuko asked Mako, hoping to pass the time on the long drive.

"Nah, I'm a No Star. I don't have anything to lose. Rather, I'm happy 'cause it's like a one week vacation."

"You have a point," Ryuko grinned, then turned her head to address Akio. "What about you, Akio? You're a No Star like us, are you going to take the week off, too?"

Akio sighed into his hand, taking his sweet time in thinking up an acceptable response.

"No. I'll be fighting as well."

"What?" Ryuko and Mako replied in unison.

"Yep."

"I thought you felt bad about beating on other people earlier?"

"I'm not going to be fighting now," He corrected. "But, come seven days from now, you'll see me at that Sudden Death Runoff."

"Wait. So, why are you fighting then, Akio?" Mako asked, tilting her head to the side. "I didn't think you'd be one to want a Goku Uniform."

"Yeah," Ryuko nodded in agreement. "Is it some kind of official 'Nudist Beach' business?"

Akio didn't even have to look back at her to see the air quotes she probably gave. Her sarcasm was evident enough.

"No, it's not. This one is more personal."

"Personal? What do you mean?"

"Well, I guess you could say I'm like you in this regard, Ryuko. I'm tired of Kiryuin watching on from afar as the city she created goes to hell. She treats this city like a science experiment, poking and prodding until she gets the outcome she wants, regardless of how it might affect the citizens. I want to show her and everyone else that we're not just lab rats. I want to show her that even a lowly pawn can topple the king."

"You really think you can do that, Akio?" Mako asked. "You'll probably have to go up against one of those Elite Four guys, and they're pretty tough."

"I doubt I could beat any of them one on one any time soon," Akio answered truthfully. "But, I have a plan. I just have to go after the weakest link."

"Oh?" Ryuko smirked at him in the rearview. "And who would that be, mister big shot?"

"Come on, you expect me to tell you now? Where's the fun in that? You'll just have to be patient like everyone else."

"Ooooh, how mysterious of you," Ryuko mocked with a giggle. "No wonder you're undercover."

"At least I know how to be subtle," Akio grinned, meeting her eyes in the mirror. "Or have you just been throwing us off by being unnecessarily loud and obnoxious?"

Ryuko huffed and crossed her arms, turning her head to the window.

"No good smart-ass..."

Mako giggled at the exchange, and leaned forwards in her seat, resting her head on the back of Akio's seat and tapping on his shoulder.

"So, where are we going, anyways?"

"I'm not sure..." Akio looked at the rearview, making eye contact with Ryuko. "Ryuko?"

"Take the exit here, then go straight."

Akio nodded and twisted the wheel, going down the exit ramp. He drove forwards for another few miles, when Ryuko spoke up again.

"Take a left."

Akio did, and the road began to lead them through a wooded area. He looked around as he drove, curious as to what could possibly be out here for the three of them to drive for so long.

As if someone was answering his question, a giant, burned down building appeared in the distance, giving him all the reason he needed.

"Oh..."

Akio slowed the car down, stopping outside of the front gate, where engraved names could clearly be seen.

Isshin and Ryuko Matoi.

Ryuko opened the car door up and hopped out, quickly followed by Mako and Akio.

Akio observed the burned down mansion as he walked towards his friend. The fire obviously did a number on it, but its stone foundation still stood, along with the occasional plank of wood. Still, it did look familiar to him. He had only been here once back when he was about eleven. Back then, the mansion was still standing tall, regal and proud. The thing had been huge, with at least fifty different rooms, not even including Dr. Matoi's underground laboratory.

It seemed like so long ago, now.

"Is this-" Mako began before Ryuko cutting her off.

"My family's house."

"A wreck like this?"

"It wasn't always this way," Akio spoke up, his eyes never leaving the destroyed building. "It used to be quite the mansion, back in the day."

"You've been here before?" Mako asked, facing Akio.

"Once," Akio nodded. "But it was a long time ago, back when my brother first started his work under Ryuko's father."

"Wait, so does that mean you used to be a rich girl, Ryuko?"

"No, of course not," Ryuko scoffed, taking a few steps towards the mansion. "My mom died right after I was born, and my dad was a scientist who only had time for his research."

Akio bit his cheek, feeling guilty that he knew all of this already. It felt wrong, somehow. This was fairly personal information, and yet here he was, already in the know.

He knew a fair amount about Ryuko already, but what did she know about him? That he was adopted, he had a brother, and that his mother taught dancing. That was about it.

"We never got along, so I started living in the dorms in grade school," Ryuko exhaled slowly, before continuing again. "I started to turn bad and fight all the time. By my first year of high school, I was a full-blown juvenile delinquent. And then, six months ago, I got a message from Dad saying that he wanted to talk, so I went home for the first time in ages. But..."

"But, then the fire," Akio finished for her.

"Yeah. Then the fire."

Ryuko walked down a side path that lead to the mansion's back yard, Akio and Mako following closely behind.

"When we lived apart, there were times when I hated him," Ryuko said quietly, coming to a stop on the cement pavement.

Mako hopped up on a nearby rock, kicking the air as she listened closely to what Ryuko had to say next.

Akio crossed his arms and leaned against a broken down stone pillar, his eyes trained on Ryuko.

"But when he died, I realized for the first time that I didn't know anything about my father."

Akio turned his head down, feeling guilt bubble up again in his chest. It was sad that for a long while Akio knew more about Ryuko's father than Ryuko did herself.

Ryuko slammed her scissor into the ground, leaning heavily against its hilt.

"So I at least wanted to find out who killed him, and why. And what he was trying to tell me. And what this scissor is."

Her hand moved to the blade, her fingers slowly running up and down the flat side of it.

"I want to find those answers," Ryuko whispered, her hand moving to the eye on her chest. "And to know why my dad created you, Senketsu..."

Ryuko flinched when a hand fell on her shoulder, giving it a soft squeeze. She looked up to see the smiling face of Akio, with Mako standing right behind him.

"I'll do my best to help you find those answers, Ryuko. I promise."

"Yeah, me too! I may not be as good at Akio at this kind of stuff, but I'll do my best! I'm sure I could learn!" Mako slapped her two hands on top of Akio's, beaming at her best friend. "You're not alone, Ryuko. You have us. It's not just Senketsu. Me, Akio, my family, we all love you, Ryuko."

Ryuko blinked, taken back by her words, before breaking out into a big smile and placing a hand on theirs.

"I know that. Thanks, you guys," Ryuko said, giving the hands one last squeeze before stepping forwards. "There's just one more thing I want to check out."

Ryuko's form disappeared in a flash of light, only for the light to disperse as quickly as it appeared. She was no longer wearing her usual sailor uniform get-up, but instead the fully activated Senketsu.

Grabbing her scissor with both hands, she slammed the blade into the ground, breaking it apart to reveal Dr. Matoi's secret laboratory underneath. She fell through the hole, landing gracefully on the ground below.

"You wait here, Mako. I think I saw some rope not too far back."

Mako nodded and knelt in front of the giant hole in the ground, relaying what Akio had said to her to Ryuko.

Akio walked off towards where he thought he saw the pile of rope, examining the ground closely as he did. He could have sworn he had saw it not too far off...

Without realizing it, Akio had walked straight into the burnt down remains of the Matoi's mansion. Glancing around, he spotted the rope a few feet from him.

"There you are," Akio mumbled to himself, bending down to pick up the rope when a bright flash of light caught his interest.

"Hmmm?"

Akio walked a few steps forwards to where the light was coming from, bending over to remove some of the rock and rubble. Underneath all of that was a single picture frame. It seemed that the sunlight had hit the glass perfectly, causing the glare to catch his attention. The glass itself was covered in dirt and grime, hiding most of the picture underneath. Popping open the frame and setting it down, Akio pulled out the picture inside.

It was a photo of Isshin Matoi and a very young Ryuko, who could be no older than four. The doctor was smirking at the camera as he held on to Ryuko's hand. He looked the same as Akio had remembered him, gray hair and hunched over. Ryuko herself was pretty much expressionless, hugging a teddy bear tightly to her chest and her other hand gripping on to her father's.

When could they have taken this? It must have been before things went estrange, when Ryuko was still very young. If Akio was a guessing man, he'd wager this was the only photo of the two in the entire mansion.

Akio smiled at the photo, lightly wiping off some excess dust and dirt. It seemed to be the last little bit of their life here.

"Akio! Did you find the rope?"

"Yeah! Just a sec!"

Akio slipped the photo into his pocket and walked back to the rope, picking it up and hurrying back to where Mako was waiting for him. When the time was right, he'd have to give that to Ryuko. Right now might not be the best time, but he wouldn't forget.

Sadly, Ryuko found nothing in her father's laboratory. The only thing down there were cobwebs, rubble, and dust. It had been as rundown as the mansion above it. It was almost strange how barren it had been. Akio doubted that Dr. Matoi would have been able to clean it out before his killer had arrived. Could the killer have picked the place clean? Or could it have been Aikuro?

Akio sighed and rested his arm on the car door, gripping the steering wheel lazily with his other hand. It was time to head home.

Or so he thought.

The engine made a few suspicious noises, followed by the van slowing down rapidly, eventually coming to a complete stop at the side of the road.

"Why are we stopping?" Ryuko asked from the back seat.

"I don't know," Akio mumbled, checking the dashboard. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The engine hadn't overheated, the battery hadn't died, and the gas gauge was as full as when he left.

As full as when he left...

"Damn it," Akio cursed and punched the steering wheel. "The gas gauge is busted. We ran out of gas."

"Oh, excellent! Ryuko shouted kicked the back of Akio's seat. "It looks like that scooter wasn't such a bad idea after all, was it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Akio grumbled and pulled out his phone, dialing a number and hitting call. "I'll just call a tow truck."

He hopped out of the car, followed by Ryuko and Mako. Taking a few steps away from the group, he put the phone to his ear.

What he didn't mention was that he was planning on putting it on Aikuro's debit card. It was technically his fault, it only seemed fair. And after a very, very helpful phone call, the situation was settled.

"Well, they'll tow the truck back to my place, but they won't give us a ride," Akio said as he made his way back to them.

"What? Seriously?"

"Seriously. It looks like we're going to have to find a ride."

"Don't worry guys, I have an idea," Mako grinned and pulled a sign out of nowhere, waving it wildly at the passing cars. "We'll hitchhike!"

"Wait a second-"

"Hey!" Mako shouted and extended her arm with her thumb up. "HEYHEYHEYHEY! HEY! HEYHEY! HEYHEYHEY!"

A convertible zoomed by, the smoke from its exhaust billowing behind it causing all three to cough up a storm.

"JACKASS! Watch where you're driving!"

Apparently the driver had heard Ryuko's angry shouts, as it stopped completely and slowly backed up to where the three were standing. Coming to a stop, the driver turned in his seat, resting his arm on the back of it as he addressed the trio.

"What's wrong? Did you break down?"

It was none other than the Disciplinary Committee Chair, Ira Gamagoori.

Author's Notes:

So there you have it!

Got some juicy Ryuko/Akio/Mako moments, and we learn a little about what's to come in the next few chapter. With the Sudden Death Runoff Election on the horizon, just what is Akio planning? How could he hope to compete? And the weakest link? Is there even such a thing on the Elite Four? And what about Gamagoori? How is that going to work out?

Well, you'll find out everything and more next time on Before My Body is Dry!

Thanks for reading everyone! I always appreciate the support!

Until next time!

The Pawn's Gambit, Part II

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to Part II of The Pawn's Gambit! I don't know if everyone caught this last chapter, but this will in fact be a three parter. My first ever! Should be fun!

We got a lot going on this chapter. In fact, we'll even get a bit of a look into Akio's past!

I had fun writing this chapter, so I hope you guys have fun reading it.

Oh, and a big shout out to the guest reviewers! I can't message you all personally, but consider this as my thank you to you!

So sit back, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Gamagoori turned in his seat, resting his arm on the back of his chair as he addressed the trio.

"What's wrong? Did you break down?"

"Whoa!" Mako exclaimed, blinking excessively at the Elite. "I reeled in Gamagoori!"

"Yeah," Akio chuckled and scratched the back of his head. "My car's gas gauge is busted, so we ran out."

"Hmmm. That's too bad."

"Yeah, but what're you gonna do, you know?"

"Huh? Why are you guys talking like friends?" Ryuko said, looking back and forth between Akio and Gamagoori, before settling for a hardened glare at the giant. "You followed us here, didn't you Gamagoori?"

"Calm down," Gamagoori replied, closing his eyes and turning back to his steering wheel. "I have no intention of fighting you here."

"There's no reason to worry," Akio agreed. "Gamagoori isn't one to pick fights outside of school grounds. He's rather reserved, in that regard."

"Indeed. Our fight will be at the Sudden Death Runoff, Matoi."

"What do you want, then?"

"Get in."

"Huh?"

"I am Ira Gamagoori, Honnouji Academy Disciplinary Committee Chair. If I come across a Honnouji Academy student in trouble off of campus, it is my duty to assist them. That holds true for even you. Get in."

Akio shrugged and moved to the front seat. He wasn't going to complain. A free ride is a free ride, and Gamagoori had a pretty sweet ride.

"You sit in the back with Matoi, Takahiro. I want to continue my conversation with Mankanshoku about these so called 'PJs.'"

Akio nodded with a smirk, moving to the back seat and taking a seat. Gamagoori seemed to have taken quite the interest with Mako, similar to a scientist who discovered something he didn't quite understand. It was probably due to her nature. Compared to Gamagoori, Mako was nearly a polar opposite. Hell, Mako probably wouldn't mind, either. She did love her PJs.

"Holy crap," Akio bounced up and down in the seat a few times.
"This is a very nice car, Gamagoori."

Gamagoori met Akio's eyes in the rearview, giving a nod of thanks.

After Mako had finished marveling over the car's exterior, the two girls joined Akio, Mako sitting up front and Ryuko sitting in back.

Gamagoori adjusted his rearview mirror, then the side ones, and finally his seat belt, before turning to his three guests.

"Does everyone have their seatbelts buckled? Are all arms and legs inside of the vehicle?"

He sounded just like one of those people that work those roller coasters at theme parks. What a surprise.

"Yes, *sir* ."

"I'll pretend I didn't catch that tone in your voice, Matoi."

With that, Gamagoori pushed down on the gas, and they drove off without any other words spoken to each other.

So they tootled around with Gamagoori driving at the *exact* speed limit. Eventually, him and Mako started their conversation on PJs, right after Mako had finished the car song she had been singing beforehand.

Ryuko rested her elbow on the car door, her head placed in her hand. She watched the city lights and buildings fly by, her mind elsewhere if her furrowed brow was any indication.

Akio leaned back in his seat, draping his arms over the back and resting his head on the soft cushion. He watched the stars above as they drove along, thinking about absolutely nothing except for what a beautiful sight it was, thankfully not diminished by the lights of the city.

He should really talk Aikuro into getting a convertible.

"Hey, Akio."

Akio lifted his head and looked over to Ryuko, who had been watching him for the past few minutes with a curious expression on her face.

"Yes?"

"What about you?"

Akio rose an eyebrow. "What about me?"

"You know, your family. I know all about Mako's, you know all about mine, but you've rarely talked about yours, except for your pervy brother and dancing mother."

"Hmmm," Akio hummed and glanced over at Gamagoori.

Ryuko followed his gaze and shook her head.

"Don't worry. They're so engrossed in their conversation I don't think they'd even notice if one of us died back here."

Akio snorted. There was some truth to that. Just at first glance, you could tell that Mako was enthralled with talking to someone such as Gamagoori, and Gamagoori, even though he was driving, was listening attentively as Mako talked about her favorite PJs and the benefit of wearing them.

"Well, alright then. Fair is fair. What would you like to know?"

"You said you were adopted, right? What about your birth parents?"

Akio exhaled slowly and rested his head back on the seat, turning his eyes back to the sky above.

"They were young when they had me, only seventeen and still in high school."

"Really?"

"Yeah. My grandparents on my mother's side were very prestigious lawyers, and they didn't like the idea of their seventeen year old 'princess' having a bastard with some random kid. My father's parents were once clients of her parents, so of course they agreed. To be honest, I think they were relieved. I doubt they were fond of the idea, either."

"Whoa... what about your parents, then? Didn't they want to keep you?"

Akio shrugged. "I don't know. I've never tried to contact them."

"Why not?"

"They didn't want me, so why return the favor?" Akio answered with as little resentment as possible. "In my eyes, Aikuro's parents are my actual parents, and always have been. They fed me, raised me, loved me. They were all I could ask for and more."

"What about them? What do they do?"

Akio smiled absently as his thoughts drifted to his parents.

"As you know, my mother was a dancer. In fact, in her younger years, she even danced in Broadway plays and the like."

"I still find it funny that she taught you to dance. I'm still not totally convinced that you don't secretly do ballet. One day I'll find you dancing in a pink little tutu, and I'm going to tear you a new one for it."

"I wouldn't doubt anything less," Akio chuckled, sitting up in his seat to face her. "Good luck on catching me, though. I only dance in my underground Bat Cave at midnight."

Ryuko laughed and turned to face Akio as well, resting her elbow on her seat and propping her head up with it.

"And your dad?"

"Funnily enough, he was actually an undercover teacher as well. He taught science in high school as his day job, but at night he would help your father in his lab. Now you know where Aikuro got his influences from."

"Wait, so does that mean your dad would undress at the drop of a hat? 'Cause that'd be sort of-"

Akio laughed and shook his head. "No, nothing like that. No... that one is an Aikuro special."

"Thank god," Ryuko sighed in relief. "I was worried that it'd run in the family."

"Yeah, it'd be cool though."

Ryuko rose an eyebrow, opening her mouth to question what the hell that meant when Akio burst out laughing.

"Good lord, you're easy to fool."

"Yeah, yeah," Ryuko growled, punching Akio in the shoulder. "At least I'm not a prissy little dancer."

"You're just jealous. They always are."

Ryuko laughed, but her laughter died in her throat when something caught her attention from behind Akio.

Akio rose an eyebrow and turned around to see what she was looking at.

Another car had sped up to match Gamagoori's speed. The car looked similar to something that you'd see in a drag race, with a big

engine in the front with several exhaust pipes leading out of it.

"What nerve!" Gamagoori growled. "This is a no passing zone. Don't they know the rules of the road!?"

The hood of the car peeled back, and two men in blue jumpsuits with blue biker helmets stood up in the car's seats, pulling out two guns and aiming them directly at Akio.

"Get down!"

Ryuko pounced across the seat, grabbing Akio by the head and pushing him down.

"Mankanshoku, down!"

Gamagoori did the same as Ryuko, pushing Mako's head down as he pressed down on the gas pedal. Slowly but surely, their car pushed past their assailants, leaving them in their dust.

Ryuko released her hand Akio's head, turning in her seat to watch the car that was chasing them.

"Thanks," Akio mumbled as he sat back up, rubbing the top of his head.

"Don't worry about it," Ryuko answered, her eyes on the fast approaching car. "Who the hell are these guys?"

"The Automotive Club and the Airsoft Club merged to form the Automotive Airsoft Club. I'm the one they're gunning for."

"Because you're Elite Four?" Akio asked.

"Yes. A lot of the clubs know that Matoi is the only one that can properly wear a Kamui, so they're after my Three Star uniform."

Another dozen cars appeared off of an exit ramp, speeding up to match the previous car's speed. A single car broke ahead of the

pack, leading them in their charge. The car itself was decked out with multiple airsoft guns, and had the shining red areas that indicated the presence of Life Fibers. A single human head rested on the hood, none other than the original Automotive President himself.

"We've got company!" Akio shouted.

"What's the matter Gamagoori!?" The president called out from his spot on the hood of his car. "Do you think you can escape the Automotive Airsoft Club President Ryosuke Todoroki in that clunker, Mr. Disciplinary Committee Chair!?"

Ryuko stood in her seat, raising her scissor blade to protect the other three from the bullets that would be fired at them at any second.

"Looks like we picked the wrong car to get into."

The president's car pulled up besides Gamagoori's, getting dangerously close to its side, threatening to ram it.

"Interesting! But can you keep up with my driving skills?"

With zero warning, Gamagoori spun the steering wheel to the left, causing the car to spin out.

"Whoa!"

Mako was thrown into her seat, then her chair, then into Gamagoori's shoulder.

"What the fuck!"

Ryuko fell from her perch and landed in Akio's waiting lap.

Akio himself had his arms raised in the air, laughing childishly as if it were some type of carnival ride.

"Damn it, Akio!" Ryuko shrieked. "This isn't funny!"

Gamagoori's car spun like a top along the highway, causing several of the cars pursuing him to back off lest they were to be hit by Gamagoori's unpredictable spinning.

Gamagoori laughed as well, finding as much pleasure as Akio was in the turn of events. Eventually his laughter died out, replaced by a surprised gasp when he realized he couldn't control the car.

"H-how can this be!?"

Apparently the Disciplinary Chair wasn't entirely sure how things worked out when you cranked the steering wheel to the side like it was your job.

"Don't give me that!" Ryuko shouted. "When you spin the steering wheel like a maniac, you're obviously gonna spin out! Is your brain as rookie as your license?"

Akio ceased his child-like laughter as he noticed the fast approaching wall, and the fact that Ryuko had yet to vacate his lap due to the g-force caused by Gamagoori's rapidly spinning car.

"Brace yourselves!"

Akio barely had time to pull Ryuko down and into his chest before the car crashed into the wall. He felt himself fling forwards, but immediately get pulled back due to his trusty seat-belt. The back of his head slammed into the back of his seat, missing the cushion and hitting the exterior of the car itself.

Ryuko fared better than he did, as she only fell from Akio's lap, her head hitting the seat in front of her as she fell down to the car floor.

Thankfully, both Mako and Gamagoori were wearing seat-belts, and with the protection of the air bags, neither one of them received very serious damage.

Akio slowly lifted his head, bringing a hand to the back of it to check for damage. He was bleeding slightly from where his head had hit the car, but it was surprisingly not that bad. He didn't feel concussed, either. All things considered, it could have been a lot worse.

"Is everyone alright?"

"I think so," Ryuko groaned and sat up, rubbing her head gingerly. "Thanks for the save."

"Don't worry about it," Akio answered then looked to Mako, who still had her head resting on the air bag. "Mako?"

At the sound of her name she turned her head, giving Akio a toothy grin and a big thumbs up.

"A-OK!"

She said that, but the fact that her nose was bleeding profusely made him think otherwise.

Akio activated the blades on his right glove, using their sharp edges to cut a square piece of cloth from the car's cushion.

"Here, tilt your head back and use this to stop the bleeding," Akio told her, handing her the cloth.

Mako nodded and did as she was told, never dropping her jubilant demeanor.

Any recovery the four might have wanted would have to be put on hold. Several car headlights shone on the car. The Automotive Airsoft Club had no plans on backing down now. Their pray was cornered and defeated. Now was their time to strike.

Ryuko climbed on to the trunk of Gamagoori's ruined car, brandishing her scissor blade.

"Oh, you guys think you're hot stuff, huh?"

"Matoi, stay out of this."

Ryuko looked behind her to see Gamagoori step out of the car.

"What?"

Gamagoori walked out in front of Ryuko and the others, his gigantic body shielding the three from the headlights.

"It was my mistake, so I'll fix it."

"We have you cornered, Gamagoori!" The president shouted as he revved his engine. "Cry or shout all you want, you'll get no mercy from us!"

"It'll take more than the likes of you to make me cry! And even if I did shed a tear, I would wipe it away myself! I would ask *no one* else to!"

"You're still gonna talk big, huh? Let him have it!"

An airsoft club member appeared out of one of the cars, carrying a homemade RPG on his shoulder. With the pull of a trigger, the rocket left its case, flying directly at the chest of the giant Disciplinary Chair.

Gamagoori didn't budge an inch. Several flashes of light emitted from his Goku Uniform, signaling its activation.

The rocket struck true, engulfing Gamagoori in a giant fireball.

However, it would take more than that to bring down Satsuki's Shield.

"Three Star Goku Uniform: Shackle Regalia!"

"Shit!" One of the drivers exclaimed.

"H-he transformed!" Another cried.

"Don't let that faze you!" The president shouted, trying to get his men back on track. "Get him!"

More than a dozen guns were raised at the Three Star, their nuzzles erupting as thousands of airsoft pellets were shot from them.

Akio, Ryuko, and Mako ducked underneath the cover of Gamagoori's car, only daring to have the tops of their heads peek out over the metal doors.

"Man, that thing is hard..." Mako said in awe.

With the blasting lights of the car's headlights, along with the flashes of fire from the guns, it was near impossible to see Gamagoori's outfit completely, but Akio still watched in amazement at his back. He could sort of see what looked to be various straps of cloth squeezing against his form, like some type of bondage. Several spikes lined his body, and it appeared that his arms had been tied to his chest by something. He was guessing the straps.

His Goku Unifrom took every bullet fired at him, none of them even leaving a single indentation in the cloth. It was incredible.

"Just what the hell is he?" Akio murmured.

Gamagoori erupted into a fit of laughter and giggles. It was as if he *liked* that this was happening and the pain he was feeling. It was very disturbing, to say the least.

"That's it! More! Punish me more! I've been a bad boy! Punish me! Every time you punish me, my heart is whipped!"

"Holy shit..." Ryuko breathed. "That's creepy as fuck."

"What the *hell* is he?" Akio repeated, dumbstruck by Gamagoori's sudden and disturbing change of demeanor.

"Yes! The more it's whipped, the stronger I become! Just like I was that fateful day so many years ago!"

"Oh, please no," Akio grumbled, fully aware that Gamagoori was preparing to go into a flashback. "We should have just walked home"

Gamagoori proceeded to go into a lengthy retelling of his experiences at his junior-high school, everything from how he tried to protect a kid who was being forced to jump off of the school's roof by some hoodlums, all to his first confrontation with Satsuki herself and the words that she had said to him that had changed his life forever.

"That was how I first met Lady Satsuki! For two years I waited. I awaited her graduation, enrolled in Honnouji Academy at her side, and acquired this Goku Uniform."

"Hang on," Ryuko stopped him. "Just how old are you!?"

"I turn twenty this year."

"That explains your old man face!" Mako exclaimed.

The president of the Automotive Airsoft Club was growing impatient. Revving his engine a few times for good measure, he hit the gas, his wheels screeching as the car shot forwards.

"How long are you gonna keep yapping!?"

Two other cars followed their president, forming a three pronged attack at Gamagoori's front.

The three cars collided with the Three Star, but did absolutely nothing to deter Gamagoori's stance. If anything, the cars took more damage than Gamagoori did.

"Yes! That's more like it! The more I'm punished, the more my hardness towers mighty and strong!"

"Hoooooly shit..." Akio mumbled. That's all he could do.

"He's a pervert with an old man face..." Mako whispered, echoing Akio's own thoughts.

"Not pervert, convert. The instant I reach my climax, the power that has been building up inside of me will burst out!"

Akio's jaw hit the floor. Was... was he talking about what Akio thought he was talking about? Surely Gamagoori could have used better wording than that. That just sounded... wrong. Akio felt a bit dirtier for just hearing it.

"What the fuck..."

It appeared that Ryuko had the same feeling.

Regardless, Gamagoori's uniform began to emit flashes of purple and yellow light, signaling that his uniform had indeed reached its 'climax.'

"ALL AT ONCE!"

The straps that were bound to Gamagoori's body burst open, revealing what was actually lying underneath it all.

Hundreds of tendrils exploded from Gamagoori's center, each one of them finding a desired target. The Automotive Airsoft Club didn't stand a chance. All of their cars exploded, sending their passengers flying every which way.

Akio's jaw dropped even further. It had only taken Gamagoori one hit to destroy each and every one of their vehicles. His power... it was unreal.

A few hours later, the four found themselves outside of the Mankanshoku's back alley clinic.

With the fight won, Gamagoori had kept up on his promised and drove the three back here, even with his heavily damaged car. Gamagoori was nothing if he wasn't a man of his word.

"Be careful," Gamagoori warned from his car seat. "They say 'a picnic is not done until you reach home safely.'"

"Jeez, it's not a picnic," Ryuko replied bluntly. "And besides, we're like ten feet from the door."

"I'll be waiting for you at the Sudden Death Runoff Election," Gamagoori told her, ignoring her previous comment. "I'll arrange a fitting spot for our battle."

"Come again?"

Gamagoori ignored that as well. Starting his car, he slowly pushed down on the gas, driving off into the night.

The trio watched him leave, all with different levels of curiosity etched into their features.

"So, Akio," Mako spoke up, breaking the silence. "Do you want to join us for dinner?"

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't," Akio answered politely, bowing his head in thanks. "It's getting late, and there are some things I have to talk to my brother about concerning the upcoming week."

"Fair enough. Come along, Mako" Ryuko said, turning and walking towards the back alley clinic. "Good night, Akio."

"Night, Akio!" Mako shouted, running after Ryuko.

"Goodnight you two."

Once the two were completely out of sight, Akio sighed and turned away from the clinic, his thoughts already racing.

He knew one thing, however. He had a lot of training to do.

After what he saw today, he could only hope that Ryuko would as well.

One week later...

Ryuko glanced around the full Academy courtyard, observing her surroundings. Hundreds of students filled the courtyard, all with varying degrees of injuries. Some were sporting a few minor cuts and scrapes, while others were dealing with a broken bone or two.

She could spot the four Elite Four members, all with confident smiles on their face as they looked up to the now visible Academy tower.

Ryuko ground her teeth, her fingers digging into her palm. It pissed her off just looking at them. They were all so full of themselves. No doubt they all had the same feelings of superiority running through their heads. She could almost feel it from here. The only one that looked at least somewhat composed was the giant Gamagoori.

Turning her gaze to the very back, she looked around for the only ally she could hope to expect from this upcoming bloodbath; Akio. And yet, he was nowhere to be found.

Ryuko sighed and turned her eyes back to the top of the tower, where the president herself was getting ready to make her announcement.

She couldn't worry about him right now. She could only worry about herself, like she used to.

She had to win this.

Besides, Akio could handle himself. She wasn't sure how he would stack up to the Elite Four, but credit where credit is due, he was smart; calculating, even. He wouldn't do anything if he didn't have a plan first.

Satsuki slammed her sword into the ground, signaling the crowd to quiet down for her to speak.

"Fellow comrades of Honnouji Academy!" Satsuki bellowed, her voice reaching the ears of every student. "You have done well to struggle through seven days of mortal combat to gather here to take part in the Sudden Death Runoff Election!"

Satsuki paused, turning her head up at the crowd.

"However, your battle has only just begun! Every battle over the last seven days has been recorded!"

Ryuko eyed the crowd warily, her muscles twitching in anticipation. Any second now...

"With that in mind, I will begin designating new Three-Star students based on the results of the battle here!"

The minute Satsuki had finished talking, the ground of the Academy starting shaking.

"Tch!"

Ryuko drew her scissor blade, her eyes darting back and forth as she awaited whatever the queen had planned.

The ground in five different spots began to break apart, allowing five, giant, spiky pillars to erupt from the ground. At least three of the pillars were in the vicinity of a crowded area, knocking many students over or trapping them on one of the pillar's spikes.

"There are five towers in the schoolyard!" Satsuki announced pointlessly. "Those standing atop them will be considered front-runner candidates, and the election will be conducted!"

Ryuko growled. How like Satsuki to do something so devious.

The second Satsuki had finished speaking, Ryuko heard a snapping sound in the distance, followed by the distinct sound of something whistling through the air.

Hearing something land by her feet, she looked won, smirking when she saw what it was.

A smoke grenade. Courtesy of Akio.

Several explosions rocked the arena, sending giant clouds of smoke to cover the courtyard. They seemed to be a bit stronger than the last one, as some of the explosions sent some of the students flying. They weren't injured, but there was definitely no hope for them now. It was probably better that way. Now they wouldn't get trampled on.

"Ever the pacifist," Ryuko grinned and lowered her scissor blade.

Waiting no longer, Ryuko dashed through the crowd of stunned students, her scissor blade dragging on the ground behind her. Originally, she had planned on bowling her way through the students, not even giving a second thought to who might have been injured in her warpath.

Maybe Akio was rubbing off on her.

Her feet smacking the ground as she ran, Ryuko had made it to the pillar nearest to her, only knocking over a few students here and there.

The confident grin that Uzu had been wearing all morning had never left his face, even with the unexpected smoke bombs that had rocked the crowd. Unfortunately, it seemed that most of them had been clumped near him, and he'd be lying if they didn't stun him slightly. It shouldn't matter too much in the end, but he didn't like that he got caught with his guard down.

Oh, well. Compared to the rest of the students here, Uzu could have two broken legs and he'd still make it to the top of that pillar before anyone else.

And as luck would have it, it seemed he was right. The mob of students that had reached the pillar before him were still struggling heavily with climbing the tall stonework, but it'd be no match for Uzu.

Taking large strides, Uzu jumped through the air and directly at the pillar.

With that single hop, he nearly cleared half of it.

Uzu's smirk grew.

Child's play.

Within seconds he made it to the top of the pillar. Compared to the rest of the Four, he had to have been first. With that speed? It was no contest. There was no way someone like Jakazure or Inumuta could have beaten him. He was the Athletics' Committee Chair, after all.

As expected, Uzu was the first of the Four to reach the top of the tower.

However, that didn't make him the first person.

"Hello, Sanageyama."

The No Star Akio Takahiro stood at the other side of the pillar, his arms crossed as he grinned victoriously at the Elite Four member.

Author's Notes:

So there you have it! A shorter chapter, but a fair bit going on in this one.

Well, we did in fact get to see some of Akio's past! Not a whole lot, but some.

And of course, also very important, was who Akio was planning on fighting in the Sudden Death Runoff Election.

Uzu? Is he crazy? With Uzu's ability to "see the entire world with his mind," how could Akio hope to compete? Well, I understand where he's coming from. Given the fact that so far, Uzu is the only one that fights with melee combat, Akio must assume that he'd be his best chance of victory. Maybe he has something else up his sleeve as well...

Anyhow, thanks for reading guys! I always appreciate it.

Until next time!

The Pawn's Gambit, Part III

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to The Pawn's Gambit, Part III!

I hope you guys enjoyed E3 as much as I did. So much awesome stuff was revealed. I got hyped as hell for Fallout 4, Dishonored 2, and Fire Emblem: Fates. And don't even get me STARTED on the FF7 remake. I am so ready for the next holiday season and 2016. I need these games, man. I only hope my wallet can take it.

With this chapter we get into the Uzu and Akio fight, along with some other important things. This was a fun chapter to write, so I hope you guys like it!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Akio stood across the pillar from Uzu, his arms crossed as he smiled smugly at him.

"Hello, Sanageyama."

Uzu stared dumbly at the man in front of him, his mouth agape. Well, he couldn't exactly see him since his eyes were sewn shut, but he could still see him with his mind.

"W-wh-wha-" Uzu stammered before shaking his head to rid his astonishment. "What the hell are you doing here, Takahiro?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Akio smirked and spread his arms wide. "I've come to compete, obviously. And it seems that you're in my spot, Sanageyama."

"Your spot?!"

At that point, the rest of the Elite Four and Ryuko had made it to their pillars, and were watching the scene play out with varying levels of curiosity.

"What's this?" Inumuta asked, clearly as surprised by the turn of events as everyone else. "This is unexpected, indeed."

"Heh," Nonon snorted, shaking her head. "Of course it would be one of you three monkeys that got showed up by some No Star. For shame, for shame."

"He cheated!" Uzu exclaimed, his anger at being beaten rising by the second. "If it wasn't for those damn grenades, I would have beaten him by a mile!"

Gamagoori said nothing, only watching Uzu with disrespect and anger.

Ryuko watched silently as well, a grin growing on her lips. For all of this so called undercover work, Akio really didn't try that hard to keep a low profile. She couldn't help but think that this will be an entertaining event.

Satsuki watched the whole scene transpire from her perch on the tower, not even a hint of surprise gracing her face. Regardless of what Akio may have done, he had gotten there first.

"You know the rules, Sanageyama," Satsuki said, her voice reaching far and wide. "Takahiro made it to the pillar first. You are hereby-"

"Now hold on, Lady Satsuki," Akio interrupted. "I have a proposition for you both."

Gamagoori seethed at Akio's interruption, his fists clenching audibly at his sides.

"Takahiro! How dare you interrupt Lady-"

"Now, now, Gamagoori. Let Takahiro finish."

Akio nodded and walked to the center of the pillar, turning his head up to Satsuki on her tower.

"I'm prepared to vacate this pillar if Sanageyama can beat me in a one on one contest," Akio began. "Only on one condition, however."

"That condition being?"

"I get to decide the rules of the match."

"Fine!" Uzu shouted and walked to the center of the pillar. "I won't stand here doing nothing while my name is ran through the dirt. I'll agree to any rules you set."

Satsuki nodded, her neutral expression never changing.

"If Sanageyama agrees, then so be it. What are your terms?"

"It's simple, really. The first to get knocked off of this pillar wins. However, there is a catch."

"Oh?" Uzu asked, frowning. "And what might that be?"

"We have to fight shirtless."

"Shirtless?" Ryuko repeated dumbly. That seemed... strange. Was he trying to show off? "What in the hell would that accomplish?"

"Are you really that daft?" Nonon growled irritably. "I swear, you're dumber than I thought."

Ryuko was ready to give a strong rebuttal when she finally realized just what Akio was getting at.

If they both fought shirtless, that meant that Uzu wouldn't be able to activate his Goku uniform. And without his Goku uniform, the power of his Shingantsu would be lessened. He'd essentially be on the same physical stature as Akio. It'd be a level playing field.

Uzu threw his head back and laughed, already moving to unbutton his shirt.

"That's all? If you were smart, you'd make me give up my shinai."

"What you fight with makes no difference to me," Akio replied calmly, unzipping his jacket and letting it fall to the floor. As expected, Akio wore nothing underneath his jacket, opting to go completely bare-chested instead of a tank top.

Inumuta's eyes widened at the newly formed scar on Akio's shoulder.

"So, it was you after all..."

Akio glanced to where Inumuta was standing, but didn't say a word. What would be the point? It wouldn't make a difference.

"Wait, it was him?" Nonon asked skeptically, eyeing Akio up and down. "This No Star trash?"

"It appears so," Inumuta said, adjusting his glasses. "I had assumed with the facial scars, but the one on his shoulder seals the deal. Takahiro was the man that snuck into the sewing club and fought with Iori."

Satsuki watched Akio intently from her tower, with something akin to interest in her eyes. Of course, she had known this for awhile, but his reaction was somewhat interesting to her.

Gamagoori didn't seem that fazed either, but that didn't stop him from being his usual disciplinary self.

"Takahiro! Such an offense calls for immediate-"

"He is pardoned."

Everyone, even Akio, looked up in shock at Satsuki's declaration.

"My lady-"

"I said to pardon him of any offenses," Satsuki repeated, her eyes gleaming dangerously at her Disciplinary Chair. "Did you not hear me the first time, Gamagoori?"

To his credit, Gamagoori kept his composure at the statement, and bowed deeply while placing a hand over his heart.

"Of course, Lady Satsuki. Your wish is my command."

Akio stared dumbly at the Academy's president, his mouth slightly agape. She pardoned him? Him, the man who had threatened her not even a week ago?

Satsuki met Akio's gaze, smiling slightly at the stupefied expression on his face.

"I believe you and Sanageyama have a fight to begin, no?"

Akio blinked a few times. That's right, he did. A fight he planned on winning.

Shaking the cobwebs from his brain, Akio walked to the opposite side of the pillar, cracking his knuckles and popping his neck. Uzu matched his movements to the letter, striding to the side opposite of Akio and gripping his bamboo sword lazily in his right hand.

"You might be more fun than I thought, Takahiro," Uzu smirked, bringing his shinai up to hold it with both hands. Moving his left hand from his sword to his head, he grabbed a lock of his green hair and wiggled it. "But, I bet you won't even be able to take a lock of hair off of my head when all is said and done."

"Hmph."

Akio rose his gloved fists in front of him, keeping them close to his chest. To have any hope of winning this fight, he'd have to play it smart. That meant letting Uzu start on the offensive while Akio measured his skill. He had never had the pleasure of fighting

someone as well trained in kendo as Uzu was, so he was essentially coming into this fight blind.

The two opponents stared each other down as the wind whipped through the soon-to-be arena, blowing their hair back and forth. Stared might be the wrong word considering Uzu's blindness, and yet, he saw every little bit of his opponent. Akio's chest rising and falling with every breath, his hair waving in the wind, his muscles twitching in anticipation. Ironically, Akio still had no chance to match Uzu in his sight, even with his functional eyes.

At this point, the students that had failed in making it up the pillars had skittered into the set of bleachers that lined the outskirts of the Academy courtyard. They watched the two with a baited breath, not daring to make a sound.

Akio smirked and raised a hand, beckoning Uzu to come forth.

Uzu gave no reaction, and gave his opponent no time to give one.

Faster than Akio's eyes could even keep up with, Uzu had flown across the pillar, bringing his bamboo sword up for a downwards strike.

"MEN!"

But this was just what Akio had wanted. This is how he'd win; by getting into his head.

Akio brought his arms up over his head, crossing them to form an 'x.' Uzu's shinai slammed into the groove his arms had made, the bamboo sword only stopping inches from Akio's skull.

Akio grit his teeth, withstanding the stinging pain caused by the sword. Unfortunately, it was a pain he would have to get used to in the next several minutes. He could allow Uzu to strike at his arms and wrists, but blows to the head would be disastrous. If he got knocked out, or even so much as a little dizzy, he was done for.

He could handle a broken bone or dislocated joint in this fight, but a head wound would be devastating.

"DOU!"

Akio barely had time to move his right arm down to protect his ribs as Uzu brought his shinai down for a body strike.

Damn, he's fast!

The bamboo bashed against Akio's forearm. He could already feel the welt that that was going to leave.

"KOTE!"

With a flick of his wrist, Uzu brought the sword up, nailing Akio in the wrist he had used to block it.

"Tch!"

Reflexively, Akio brought his right arm back, which only left him open for another strike.

"DOU!"

Akio dropped down to the ground to avoid the body strike, rolling to his right. He was getting pushed dangerously close to his edge of the pillar, and he desperately needed to change that. If he got knocked off, it was over.

Of course, Uzu saw this coming. With a single movement, he changed the trajectory of his shinai, bringing it down to slam Akio in his ribs mid roll.

The strike sent him sprawling across the pillar, but in his favor. Instead of being pushed to the very edge, he was sent to the very middle.

Akio hopped to his feet, gingerly rubbing the spot where he got hit.

"Was that really as hard as you can hit?"

Uzu didn't show any reaction to Akio's talk. Instead, he charged Akio again, bringing his sword up for another downwards strike.

"MEN!"

Akio raised his crossed arms once again in an attempt to block the blow to his head.

But, of course, Uzu saw this coming.

"DOU!"

Quicker than Akio could follow, Uzu's sword twisted in the air, changing its course to Akio's gut.

Akio jumped back as quick as he could to avoid the blow, but the tip of Uzu's sword still slammed into Akio's stomach, causing him to skid back several inches.

"Heh," Akio chuckled, doing his best to ignore the stinging welts on his body. "Is that as fast as you can go? Hell, I'd sew my own eyes shut after something as pathetic as that."

Once again, Uzu ignored Akio's comments.

Charging at him once again, Uzu leveled his sword for a side swipe.

"KOTE!"

Akio let the sword hit against his right wrist, ignoring the pain.

Instead of going for another strike with his sword, Uzu brought his knee into Akio's gut, stealing the air from his lungs.

"Oof!"

"MEN!"

Uzu brought his blade around, hitting Akio in the side of his head and sending him flying across the platform.

Sprawling across the ground, Akio came to a stop at the very edge, already seeing stars from the blow.

Akio rose to his feet, gently rubbing the wound on his head.

"For a so called 'kendo master,' using your knee seems like a bit of a cop-out, doesn't it?"

Uzu frowned, slowly walking towards where Akio was standing.

"For a piece of trash, you sure do like to talk."

Akio smirked. Good. He was getting to him.

"And for a man with a mind such as yours, you're really not very smart."

Uzu dashed forwards, bringing his shinai up for another downwards swing at his head.

"MEN!"

Then followed by a strike to the body.

"DOU!"

Then finally the wrists.

"KOTE!"

"MEN!"

"DOU!"

"KOTE!"

"MEN!"

"DOU!"

"KOTE!"

Akio grunted in pain, doing his best to block the lightning fast strikes. A few made their way through, but Akio could tell Uzu was slipping a little bit. If he had fainted a couple of times, he would have been able to get clean hits on Akio head or body.

Akio skirted to his left, stepping carefully to block any strikes from Uzu while he got away from the edge.

Taking a vicious hit to his nose, Akio hopped across the pillar and back towards the middle.

"What the hell is this, Akio?!" He heard Ryuko shout from her place on her pillar. "Fight back damn it!"

Akio ignored her comment, bringing his wrist up to wipe away the blood gushing from his nose.

"I can safely say that Jakazure can probably hit harder than you," Akio grinned at his counterpart. "No wonder she calls you a monkey. I wouldn't even bat an eyelash if you resorted to flinging your feces at me."

He heard a snort come from somewhere behind him, presumably from Nonon herself.

Uzu growled and charged again at Akio, grabbing his bamboo sword with both hands.

"Enough of your talk!"

This was his chance, however short it might be.

Akio darted forwards, twisting his body to the side to avoid Uzu's downward strike. Uzu still swung downwards, not expecting Akio to try and evade it.

Lashing out with his foot, Akio kicked Uzu hard in the shin, causing him to buckle ever so slightly.

Not waiting for Uzu to recover, Akio decked him in the face, sending the kendo master skidding across the pillar.

Uzu chuckled and swiped his wrist across his mouth.

"Finally fighting-"

Uzu didn't have the time to finish his sentence. Akio was already on him.

Striking fast and quick, Akio pushed Uzu back to the edge of the pillar. Uzu didn't get hit again, but he had to resort to dodging and blocking instead of going on the offensive.

Seeing an opening in his attack, Uzu brought his sword down for a side swipe against Akio's ribs. The hit rattled Akio's bones, but he stayed strong. Bringing his arm down, Akio pinned Uzu's shinai against his body. Throwing out a right hook, Akio's fist connected with Uzu's jaw, causing him to be thrown to the side.

Uzu hit the ground and rolled, hopping back to his feet with his bamboo sword still in hand. His back was to the edge of the pillar, but by no means was he out of it yet.

"Heh, you're a greater challenge than I gave you credit for," Uzu conceded, wiping at his busted lip. "Taking a hit just so you could deliver one of your own? Not only that, but trash talking me to get into my head? I have to give it to you, you have balls. That's what I look for in an opponent."

Akio smirked, falling back into a fighting stance.

"Thank you. You're not too bad yourself, Sanageyama," Akio replied, nodding in respect. "However, this fight will be over soon."

"Yes, I agree."

Uzu twirled his sword in a figure eight, bringing it up to his face so that the hilt was horizontal to his cheek and the point was pointed directly at Akio.

The two charged forwards, meeting each other in the center.

"MEN!"

Uzu swung at the side of Akio's head.

Akio rose his arm to block it, but Uzu saw this coming.

At the same time of his swing, Uzu brought his leg up and kicked at the unprotected side of Akio's head.

However, this movement caught Uzu in a difficult position. With his shinai already swung, and his leg already brought up, his movement was drastically cut and his balance would be off. This was something he should have seen with his Shingantsu, but alas, he did not. This is where Akio's planning came in. By making him take off half of his Goku uniform, not only could he not activate his uniform, but his ability to see everything with his mind was reduced.

Akio lowered his arm that was used to block the shinai, and instead ducked down to avoid Uzu's kick.

Ducking and weaving beneath his leg, Akio rose as quickly as he had lowered, cocking his arm back for a right hook aimed directly at Uzu's head.

With nothing else to block it, Uzu took his right hand off of his shinai, grabbing Akio's fist with it.

Uzu, in his excitement for a real fight paired with his natural cocky attitude, forgot a crucial part of Akio's fighting style.

Realizing his error, Uzu brought his leg back down and tried to retreat, but it was too late.

Akio pressed down on the button on his palm, releasing the four razor sharp blades above his knuckles.

The blades punched through Uzu's hand, piercing it completely. The sickening sound of the blades piercing flesh and bone echoed throughout the quiet arena, reaching every ear that was in attendance.

"GAH!"

Blood spattered on Uzu and Akio's chests, but neither seemed to care.

Uzu swung his sword haphazardly at Akio, but it was an attack of desperation, one easy to stop.

Akio grabbed the shinai with his left hand, tearing it from Uzu's grip and flinging it towards the opposite side of the pillar.

Retracting the blades from Uzu's hand, Akio cocked his right fist back and swung again, connecting with Uzu's jaw.

Uzu backpedaled away from Akio, grasping at his crippled hand in pain, but he would get no reprieve from the fight.

Akio attacked fast and hard, dealing several hits to Uzu's midsection. Uzu tried to repel the attack, but with only one good arm, it didn't do much.

Akio delivered a punch to Uzu's gut, stealing the breath from his lungs and causing him to double over, directly into Akio's flying knee.

Uzu recoiled heavily from Akio's hit. Using the same leg he had kneed him with, Akio kicked him in the chest. Uzu stumbled backwards a few more steps, finding himself with his feet on the very edge of the pillar.

Akio wasn't done yet. With Uzu's head turned to his back to make sure he didn't accidentally step too far, Akio collided into him with his shoulder. Uzu lost his footing, his arms flailing wildly as he fell over the edge.

Akio stopped his fall by grabbing him by his green hair. In fact, it was the same clump of hair that Uzu had claimed he wouldn't be able to take before the fight had started.

Releasing the blades on his other hand, he used their sharp edges to cut the hair from his head, which inevitably sent Uzu to the ground below. Uzu hit the ground with a thud, spit and blood flying from his mouth.

He had won. He did it.

Akio let out several ragged breaths, his chest rising and falling rapidly as his eyes stayed glued onto the form of Uzu down below him.

... He had won, so why did it feel like he had lost?

Shifting his gaze to his own body, he examined his bare chest. It was covered in sweat and splotches of blood; some of it his and some of it Uzu's.

Swallowing, he turned his head up to the crowd that had been watching him with wide eyes. Every eye was trained on him, but none of them looked like what he thought they would. Some of them were surprised, some of them indifferent, while others were downright frightened or angry at the turn of events.

This wasn't what he wanted. Not at all.

Deep down, underneath all of his talk, Akio also wanted to make his mark here. He wanted to make a difference. He wanted to do something worthwhile, something that people could remember. Something that people could look back on and honestly say that it had helped them somehow.

In a way, he wanted to be like Robin Hood. Stealing from the rich to give to the poor. In this case, he wanted to steal some of the pride from the Kiryuin administration and give it to the people of Honnou City. He thought that maybe if these students saw that Satsuki and the Elite Four weren't invincible, they might think better of themselves. They might try to change. They might fight back against Satsuki's fascist regime and fight for a better tomorrow. In the end, he had only wanted to help.

But, looking out at the sea of faces, not a single one of them gave any indication of that. If anything, they looked at Akio as if he were a monster, or avoided his gaze completely out of fear. Fear that if they did meet his gaze, Satsuki or one of the Elite Four might come down on them.

Nothing had changed.

Akio glanced down at his hands.

They were covered in blood.

That was the only change. The blood on his hands.

He dropped the hair from his hand as if its touch alone had shocked him, letting the strands drift to the ground below.

"Did you accomplish what you wanted to, Takahiro?"

Akio didn't have to look at Satsuki to know she was staring directly at him. Her tone didn't sound mocking, but her words were still like punches to his gut.

Besides, his eyes couldn't leave his blood red hands.

Were his ideals naive? He tried using violence to make a difference, but was that right? If history was any indication, it wasn't. For all of the planning he did, he didn't stop to think about the outcome.

... Was he any better than the Kiryuins? If anything, he had stooped down to their level.

He was a hypocrite. A monster.

"I..."

Akio could feel the bile rise to his throat. He wanted nothing more than to wash the blood from his hands.

Just when he was ready to give in completely, a single voice broke out through the Academy's courtyard, loud and proud.

"Akio, Akio, he's our man, if he can't do it, no one can!"

Akio's head snapped up, his eyes darting to where the voice had came from.

Mako stood tall in the stands, waving a sign that said 'Go Akio!' on it, as well as waving a white flag with his face on it.

"Come on, guys!" Mako shouted, motioning at the students around her. "Cheer! Cheer, cheer, cheer! Go, Akio!"

None of the other students cheered, but that didn't matter. Not to Akio. She had done enough.

He felt his eyes begin to burn, followed by a single tear rolling down his cheek. For the first time that day, Akio smiled genuinely.

"M-Mako..."

Feeling a hand rest on his shoulder, he turned around to see Ryuko standing behind him, smiling gently at him. In her other hand she held Akio's black jacket.

"You did good," Ryuko said, passing him his jacket. "Here."

Smiling even wider, he accepted his hoodie and quickly slipped it on.

With his jacket on, he turned around completely, facing Satsuki fully.

"Yes," Akio spoke up, the smile never leaving his face. "I think I did. And so, I forfeit."

Satsuki didn't answer him, but Akio could swear he saw the hints of a grin grace her lips.

"That's enough for today," Satsuki announced, turning her back to the courtyard as she walked away. "We'll continue this tomorrow."

The crowd murmured in response, but they didn't question it. They all rose from their seats, slowly making their ways out of the bleachers and out of the courtyard.

"I don't get it," Ryuko began, staring curiously at Akio. "Why'd you quit?"

"It'd be pointless to go any further," Akio answered truthfully.

"Besides, I'd rather not have to face you tomorrow."

Ryuko snorted and shook her head. "Yeah, 'cause you'd get your ass kicked."

"Exactly my point."

"Anyways," Ryuko said, changing gears. "Since we're done for the day, do you want to come join us for dinner to celebrate your big win?"

"I'd love to," Akio grinned. "I just have to speak to Aikuro first. I'm sure he has some things he wants to discuss with me."

Ryuko nodded and waved farewell, hurrying to catch up with Mako and leaving Akio alone to do what he had to.

Akio watched her and Mako walk away, watching until the two disappeared into the crowd.

The sickening feeling had never left his stomach, but the love of his friends lessened it considerably.

Akio decided to meet Aikuro in the same sake bar they had met Tsumugu at a few weeks ago. After today's events, Akio couldn't meet Aikuro in his classroom or back in their apartment. There was a very real possibility that Akio would be watched even more closely after today, or even followed. So going to the sake bar seemed like the logical choice. Like Aikuro had said, Kiryuin had no eyes here.

"You know what I'm going to say, don't you?" Aikuro spoke up, taking a sip from his sake.

Akio sighed and nodded. Of course he did. The minute Akio had told him his plans, Aikuro had opposed of it. Not because of their Nudist Beach work, but because he was seriously worried about Akio's well-being. Which proved to be a sound worry in the end. Akio might have won, but he sure did get the shit kicked out of him.

"That you don't approve of my decision, but that you'd never force me to not do something that I wanted to do," Akio said, placing the ice pack he had in his hand to his head. "Yes, I know."

"Good."

Aikuro took another sip of the liquor, placing it down and letting a long sigh escape his lips. He turned to Akio suddenly, smiling and placing a hand on his shoulder.

"With that being said, I'm very proud of you little bro. You kicked ass out there today."

Akio blinked, slightly taken back by his brother's quick change in demeanor.

"You mean it?"

Aikuro laughed, nodding enthusiastically.

"Of course! God, you should have seen the looks on the Elite Four's faces! They could scarcely believe what they had seen!"

Despite his brother's praise, Akio's expression darkened.

"Yeah, but in the end nothing changed. All that had happened was that I beat Uzu, possibly crippling his hand in the process. I failed."

"He'll be fine," Aikuro waved him off before his expression turned deathly serious. "And as your elder brother, I don't want to hear you talk like that ever again. You risked your ass by standing up against Kiryuin and her lackeys, when doing nothing would have been much easier. You succeeded, when anyone else around here would have failed. You gave it your all, Akio. Never say that you failed. Never again."

"You really mean that?"

"Of course I do. I may have been upset by your decision, but I wasn't lying when I said I was proud of you."

Aikuro turned back to his drink, taking another sip before speaking up again.

"Honestly, I was beginning to feel a bit guilty with myself."

"What? What do you mean by that?"

Aikuro shrugged, guilt and sadness beginning to show on his face.

"With us doing what we do, you've never been able to really be yourself. You've never been able to really experience how much fun being a kid can really be. You had to cut yourself off before you got too close to people. You had to suppress who you really were. It wasn't fair. I don't know, I guess I just felt bad about it."

Aikuro took another sip of his drink, a smirk beginning to grow on his lips.

"But, now I look at you, and I've seen how much happier you are. You're going out all of the time, spending the night in the town, eating dinner with your friends. You actually have a personal life now, when before you used to be a shut-in. Once this is all over, remind me to thank the Mankanshokus and Ryuko."

Akio looked directly at his brother, his second genuine smile of the day spreading across his face.

"I don't regret joining you for a second. If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a single thing. I'd follow you into hell if you asked me."

Akio poured himself a glass of sake, raising it to bump it against Aikuro's.

"Thank you, Aikuro. I don't know where I'd be today without you."

Aikuro lifted his own glass, tapping it against Akio's.

"Nor I you, little brother."

The two downed their drinks and slammed them back down on the counter.

Aikuro sighed, leaning back in his seat and placing his hands behind his head.

"You know what all of this means though, right?"

Akio sighed as well.

"Yeah. But, it shouldn't be for too long. I'll be back once things calm down again."

Ryuko and the rest of the Mankanshokus clapped their hands together.

"Let's eat!"

With that out of the way, everyone dug into their plates of food, devouring the fried croquettes in front of them.

"Oh, this is amazing, honey!"

Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled gratefully at her husband.

"Thanks honey."

"Hmmm," Ryuko let the food sit on her tongue, savoring in its taste.
"Oh, it's so, so good!"

Mrs. Mankanshoku waved her off and giggled.

"Oh, stop it. You're just flattering me now."

"No, seriously! It's really, really-"

Knock, knock, knock!

The family stopped eating, all blinking dumbly at the unexpected knocking.

"Oh, that's probably Akio," Ryuko said as she stood up. "I invited him over for dinner. I hope you don't mind."

"Please, we could care less," Mrs. Mankanshoku replied. "We're always happy to feed another mouth, especially one as polite as

Akio."

Ryuko grinned and nodded, walking over to the door with Mako following close behind.

"Hey, it's about time you-" Ryuko began as she opened the door, stopping when she finally caught sight of Akio.

He looked as normal as he ever did, except he wasn't wearing his black hoodie, and instead opted for just a plain white t-shirt and jeans. Several bruises covered his arms and face, varying in color. His lip was busted, his nose swollen and bleeding slightly, and he had a black eye to boot. However, the thing that stood out most was the two duffel bags he carried in his hands.

"Hey," Akio greeted, raising his arms to show off his bags. "Do you guys mind if I stay here for a little while?"

Ryuko rose an eyebrow and looked back to Mako, who had already ran forwards, taking Akio's bags in her hands.

"Of course you can stay here! You don't even have to ask!"

Mako skipped off into her house with Akio's bags, cheering merrily.

"Oh, this'll be fun! Fun, fun, fun! It'll be like a slumber party, but a really long one!"

Ryuko looked back to Akio, smirking.

"You hear that? A slumber party. I hope you're good at painting nails and braiding hair."

Akio snorted and walked into the house, closing the door behind him.

"Compared to you? I think I'll do just fine."

Ryuko laughed, placing her hands on her hips.

"You know what? I wouldn't even be surprised. With all of that cooking and dancing you do, you're only one chromosome off from being a girl anyways."

"Ah, a genetics joke! So you *do* pay attention in class!"

"Yeah, yeah, keep it up," Ryuko replied and walked back towards the dining room with Akio following close behind.

The Mankanshokus all greeted Akio affectionately, a plate of food already set up for him at the table.

It looked like Ryuko and the Mankanshokus would have an extra guest at their dinners for awhile.

Not that any of them cared in the slightest.

Author's Notes:

So there you have it!

Like I said, there was the Uzu fight, but a bunch of other stuff went on in this chapter. Bunch of hard hitting realizations for Akio. Maybe his fight wasn't as righteous as he first thought?

His ideals and ambitions took a hit this chapter, but thankfully, he has some great people backing him up.

Thanks for reading everyone! I always appreciate it! If you feel like it, drop a review! I always love hearing and talking to you guys.

Until next time!

Paralogue - Yin and Yang

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the second paralogue of Before My Body is Dry!

I love you guys, so I wanted to post another short update.

It's been 13 chapters, nearly 70,000 words, and it's time to keep a certain ship sailing.

The title of this chapter should give you a hint.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

The sound of the clock ticking away echoed throughout the Mankanshoku's quiet shack. It was a peaceful rhythm, one that should have lulled Akio to sleep, but it didn't.

It couldn't.

He could hear the sounds of peaceful breathing coming from the room next to his. With a total of six people now, seven counting Guts, it was hard pressed to find a spot for Akio to sleep. So, that's how came to find himself staying in Ryuko's room, considering she was the only one with a single, unshared room. He was a little reluctant at first, but Ryuko said she didn't mind, so he shouldn't either. Good enough for him.

Akio was lying on his side of the room, his hands behind his head as he stared up at the dark ceiling.

The events of the day raced through his head, showing no indication of stopping anytime soon.

Uzu's pained face when Akio's blades tore through his hand, the look of the crowd as they stared terrified or angered at the scene before them. It sickened him to think about it. He thought he was helping the Academy by showing what a regular person could accomplish, but in reality, he just made himself seem like the villain. Uzu would have never had gone as far as he did. Hell, he fought with a bamboo sword. He'd never impale Akio's body like he did to Uzu.

And that thought made him think. Was he any better than the people he despised? Was Nudist Beach any better than the Kiryuin administration? Nudist Beach was fighting fire with fire, all in an attempt to stop the near fascist regime that was the Kiryuins. Was that really the way to go? Sometimes rebellion is necessary to bring about great change, but at what cost? How many people would be injured, lives lost, families ruined, if this conflict blew up? He knew that the Nudist Beach's agenda was for the betterment of all people, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

These thoughts had plagued his mind ever since he had tried to fall asleep. It's funny how when you really want to get some rest, your brain won't let you.

Akio sighed, turning his head to peek over at the slumbering form of Ryuko.

If it wasn't for Mako and Ryuko, his entire foundation of who he was might have fallen apart today.

Aikuro had been right with what he had said earlier. Mako and Ryuko made him a better person. In fact, if it wasn't for Ryuko arriving here, Akio would still be doing what he had been before; his undercover work. He'd be pushing people away and shutting himself in, all because his work for Nudist Beach would have been more important to him. It made him sad to think that he probably wouldn't even be this close to the Mankanshokus if it wasn't for Ryuko's timely appearance.

There wasn't a doubt in his mind that if it wasn't for Ryuko, his life would be worse. He had been able to transition out of his old way of living, and into something better. He still had his position at Nudist Beach, but now he was doing something more with his life.

And it was all thanks to Ryuko.

"Gah."

Maybe he was thinking too much about all of this. And why did all of his thoughts seem to drift to Ryuko all of a sudden?

Sighing once more, Akio rose from his sleeping mat and walked to the bedroom door.

He needed some fresh air.

Walking out into the cool night air, Akio took a deep breath, savoring the cold air in his throat.

He might not know what he was fighting for, but he knew who he was fighting for.

Maybe that was enough.

Ryuko lied on her side, staring blankly at the wall in front of her.

The annoying sound of the clock ticking away had kept her awake. Stupid clocks. As of now, she officially hated them.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

Ryuko pursed her lips, fighting off the urge to grab that clock and smash it with her fist. She thought that the sounds of everyone else calmly sleeping might be able to lull her to sleep, but boy, was she wrong.

Not that they would, anyway. Her mind was too active to fall asleep.

How could it not be? Tomorrow would determine if she would find out what happened to her father or not. Regardless of what happened, if she came out on top, she might just be able to force the answer of what happened to her father out of Satsuki. If she lost, there was no hope of her getting them, and even worse, she'd be a failure. Not just a failure to herself, but to her father.

Ryuko *had* to win tomorrow. She needed this. She had to be strong. Ruthless, even.

It felt wrong to think that, but it was the truth.

Rolling over onto her back, she glanced over at Akio, who was sleeping peacefully despite the sound of the annoying clock. She watched him for a few minutes, trying to sync up her own breathing with his just for the hell of it.

If Akio had taught her anything these past couple of months, it was that she didn't need to revert to her old ways to get things done. She had to win tomorrow, but maybe she didn't have to do it ruthlessly like she used to.

Ryuko grimaced, remembering exactly how truly cruel she had once been.

She wasn't lying when she had told Mako and Akio that she had once been a delinquent. She had spared no expense in beating the crap out of people that had pissed her off in middle school. At one point, they'd cry for her to stop, and she rarely did. People didn't call her the Kanto Vagabond for nothing.

On the other hand, whenever she had seen Akio fight, he always reverted to countering when he could, and rarely went on the offensive. His fight with that boxing club douche was a clear example of that.

However, when it really mattered, he gave it his all. The fight with Tsumugu came to her mind. He had charged him without a second

thought, not hesitating once with his strikes. And when he had finally beat him? He let Tsumugu go, and instead came to check up on her and Senketsu. Being victorious hadn't mattered to him, just the fact that Ryuko and Senketsu were alright was victory enough.

Then, today with Uzu, Akio had been a mix of both. He felt his opponent out, letting him attack relentlessly. Then after awhile, Akio attacked back, pushing Uzu to his limits, and eventually beating him.

Akio might talk a big game sometimes, but Ryuko knew that he would never consciously choose to do something like what he had done today. He was always drifting back and forth on how to go about things. One day, he'd threaten someone's life for trying to steal Senketsu or for threatening her and Mako. The next, he'd crumble at the violence he had caused. The horror on his face today when he realized how far he had gone was evidence of that. It almost broke her heart just looking at him.

Ryuko sighed, her expression darkening.

Deep down, she wanted to be like Akio, but she just couldn't. She couldn't afford to be soft like he was. Not yet. Not when she was this close.

She'd beat the Elite Four, kick Satsuki's ass, and find out who killed her father. After that, maybe then she could be a little more like Akio.

But, what then? When she found her father's killer, what would she do? Beat them up? Let them go?

... Kill them?

"Gah."

Ryuko flinched at the sound of Akio's disgruntled noise, followed by the sound of him getting out of his sleeping bag and walking out of the room.

Exhaling slowly, Ryuko sat up and ran a hand through her hair. She needed some fresh air.

Standing up and walking over to where Senketsu was hanging, she slipped him on and walked towards the door.

"Ryuko," Senketsu spoke. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Yeah, I just need some fresh air."

"Ah," Senketsu hummed. He remained quiet for a few moments before speaking up once more. "Worried about tomorrow?"

"No, of course not," Ryuko answered flatly, walking out of the room and towards the front door. "With you by my side, there's not a doubt in my mind that we'll win whatever they throw at us tomorrow. But..."

"But?"

"But... I don't know *how* we should win."

"Hmmm," Senketsu paused, then let out a chuckle. "He's really rubbing off on you, isn't he?"

Ryuko's hand stopped on the door knob, her head turning down to look at Senketsu.

"Huh?"

"Akio. His ideals are starting to get to you."

Ryuko frowned. "Is that wrong?"

"No, of course not. I respect Akio. In fact, I think he's a honorable man. Hell, he's even saved our hides more times than I can count... But..."

"But?"

"But, his mentality doesn't fit our situation. I know you want to win tomorrow, and to do so we can't have any doubt in ourselves. I'd wager he'd even tell you the same thing."

"Yeah, you're right," Ryuko nodded, patting her breast where Senketsu's eye was. Of course he was right. She just wanted to make sure she wasn't doing the wrong thing in the end. "Thanks, Senketsu."

"It's what I'm here for, Ryuko."

The two walked out into the cold night. Ryuko took a deep breath, letting the cool air calm her senses. The night was clear, and beautiful. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, allowing the full moon's light to shine down on her. It was cold enough that she could see her breath, but not so cold that she was going to freeze.

She took another deep breathing, watching as it drifted away into the air.

"You really admire him, don't you?"

Ryuko looked down to Senketsu, raising an eyebrow.

"Excuse me?"

"You admire Akio."

Ryuko didn't answer him. Instead, she walked away from the Mankanshoku's shack and to the back of it.

"I know you well, Ryuko. You wouldn't even think to compare yourself to someone if you didn't admire them."

Making it to behind the shack, Ryuko walked over to its electric generator and climbed on top of it so that she could get to the roof.

"Yeah, so maybe I do," Ryuko grunted as she pulled herself up.

"What of it?"

"Nothing, nothing," Senketsu replied cheekily. "I just find it interesting is all."

Ryuko walked to her normal spot, which happened to be directly behind the giant neon sign that was right out in front of the house. Whenever she needed to think, she liked to come out here on the roof and sit against the back of the sign, just to stare at the sky above. The moon and Senketsu were quite skilled at clearing her mind.

"What's so interesting about-"

Ryuko stopped mid-sentence.

It seemed that a certain someone had shared her idea of getting some fresh air.

"Speak of the devil," Senketsu said with a chuckle.

Akio sat against the back of the sign, his head turned upwards as he stared listlessly at the moon and stars. The moonlight shone down on him, illuminating only the right side of his face. The three scars that ran down his right eye and cheek were perfectly visible in the light, contrasting against his deep, green eyes.

He always seemed to have a serious look on his face, but right now, underneath the moonlight, he looked at peace. His mouth had curved upwards, his eyes far off as he was clearly was lost in his own thoughts. Ryuko would be lying if she wasn't curious as to what he was thinking about.

She almost didn't want to interrupt him.

Hearing her footsteps, Akio turned his head towards her, his eyes wide as saucers. He made a look that was startlingly similar to that of a child getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Ryuko had to bite her cheek to keep from giggling at his startled expression. Apparently he wasn't expecting company, and especially not her.

"Ryuko?! What are you doing here?"

Well, no hope for not interrupting him.

"What am I doing here? You're in my spot, man."

"Oh."

Akio glanced around and began to stand.

"Sorry, I'll leave you-"

"Don't be an idiot."

Ryuko paced over to where he was sitting, plopping down beside him on the cold roof tiles.

"There's enough room for two up here."

Akio grinned sheepishly and nodded, sitting back down and letting his back lean against the sign.

The two sat in a comfortable silence, both staring up at the night sky.

"So," Akio began, breaking the silence. "What are you doing out here at this hour?"

"I needed to clear my head. You?"

"Same. You wanna talk about it?"

"Not really," Ryuko answered. "You?"

"Nah," Akio replied, relaxing against the sign at his back. "This is good enough for me."

Ryuko smiled, letting herself relax as she leaned fully against the sign. For the first time that night, her mind was at peace.

"Same here."

Author's Notes:

So there you have it!

I won't say anything much about this chapter. I'll just let this one simmer :^).

Thanks for reading guys!

Until next time!

Satsuki's Shield

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Before we get started, I wanted to say a big thank you to all of you for reading and sticking with me so far! With the last chapter, we broke 50 followers! Yay! I love all of the support you guys have given me so far!

Anyhoo, we got a long chapter on our hands here! In this chapter, we get to the big show down with none other than Ira Gamagoori. But of course, we have some other stuff going on too! A bunch of stuff for the things to come!

Speaking of things to come, I got some BIG things planned later on down the road of this story. Stay tuned guys! Shit hasn't even begun to hit the fan yet!

Well, enough of my chit-chat. Read, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

The rays of sunlight came in from a nearby window, basking Akio in its warmth. His eyes fluttered open, a sigh of contentment escaping his lips as he stretched in his sleeping mat.

There is no better feeling than being able to wake up without the use of an alarm clock. Just being able to awake once you feel you've slept enough is one of the greatest joys of mankind. It's just so damn rejuvenating. It's like plugging your body into a wall socket and letting yourself recharge to one hundred percent.

Akio sat up in his bedding, yawning and arching his back, stretching his arms into the air.

Despite the questionable day he had waiting for him, this wasn't a half bad way to wake up.

Finally picking himself up from the ground, he glanced over to the other side of the room, finding that Ryuko had already woke up and left. She probably went for breakfast already.

Walking over to the far corner of the room, Akio placed himself in front of the cracked mirror that leaned against the wall.

He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes inevitably drifting to the three scars on his face. They looked better now, but they still hurt to look at. He always thought that he would look bad-ass with scars, but that clearly wasn't the case when he actually got them. Sure, they looked kinda cool, but they hurt like hell, and right now they were still all red and scabby.

His eyes then focused on the black eye he was sporting, as well as the several other cuts and scrapes he wore on his face. He looked like he had just gotten out of a bar fight.

Akio sighed and pulled off his shirt to examine his chest. Other than a few bruises, nothing looked to out of place.

He brought a hand up, gently rubbing the newly formed scar on his left shoulder. It was pretty sore this morning, which pissed him off, but it wasn't terrible. It was expected of flesh wounds as deep as his.

Dropping his gym shorts, he threw both articles of clothing behind him and grabbed a shirt and jeans from a nearby duffel bag.

Right as he pulled on his pants, the door to the bedroom opened and in walked Ryuko.

She was wearing her familiar orange PJs with bunnies on it, along with an interesting pair of orange bunny slippers to match. Her hair was a complete mess, and her eyes had slight bags under them. It seemed that she didn't sleep as well as he did, or she just wasn't much of a morning person. Neither seemed like much of a stretch.

The sight of her half naked roommate caused Ryuko to flush slightly, but to her credit she didn't let it faze her. Besides, she was the one to offer her room for him to stay in.

"Hey Akio," Ryuko greeted, walking to her side of the bedroom. "Breakfast will be ready in a second."

"Sounds good."

Akio pulled on his shirt, grimacing slightly as the movement caused some pain to flare up in his shoulder.

"Damn it," Akio sighed, grumpily adjusting his shirt.

"Something wrong?" Ryuko asked as she walked up behind him. Surprisingly, she had already changed out of her pajamas and had put on Senketsu, as well as fix up her hair.

"My shoulder wound is just acting up."

Ryuko's expression faltered for a second, concern briefly clouding her features.

"Are you going to be alright?"

"I'll be fine. Besides, I'm not the one fighting today," Akio replied, glancing at the girl behind him, finally noticing her change in outfit. "You change surprisingly quick."

Ryuko crossed her arms at that, giving Akio a rather pointed look.

"I'm currently sharing my bedroom with a guy. I'm sorry if I don't take my time to make sure you get a proper show."

Akio chuckled and shook his head, the pain in his shoulder already dissipating thanks to their usual banter.

"Come on," He said, motioning with his head towards the door. "Let's go get something to eat."

Ryuko nodded, falling into step with him as the two walked out of the bedroom and into the dining room.

"Morning you two," Mrs. Mankanshoku grinned at the two from her place at the table. "Sit down and eat up!"

The two teens returned the smile, taking their seats beside Mako at the table.

With hands like lightning, Mako reached out and shoveled several of the croquettes on two plates, handing one each to Ryuko and Akio.

Nodding their thanks, both of them dug into their plates of food. As always, it was absolutely delicious. Akio didn't know how Mrs. Mankanshoku did it, but her food was always amazing. He prayed to the powers that the food didn't cause him to blush.

"So, what's on the docket today, you three?" Mr. Mankanshoku asked in-between bites.

"The end of the Naturals Election, I assume," Akio answered, taking a bite of his own. "I'm not sure what Kiryuin has in store for Ryuko, but I could only imagine it involves fighting the rest of the Elite Four."

"Yeah? Well bring 'em on," Ryuko barked, scarfing down a handful of croquettes. "Me and Senketsu will kick their asses."

"Don't take them for granted," Akio advised. "They aren't Elite Four for nothing. You saw how Gamagoori took care of the Airsoft Automobile Club the other day."

"Whatever," Ryuko dismissed Akio's worry with a wave of her hand and took a sip of her miso soup.

"... Don't give me that crap."

Ryuko blinked at Akio, the cup of miso soup hovering above her lips.

"Huh?"

"You heard me," Akio scowled, setting down his food. "It's one thing to be cocky, but it's another to be an idiot. I'm warning you, don't underestimate them."

The Mankanshokus all paused in their eating, casting a worried glance over at the two. The only one who seem undisturbed by the turn of events was Guts the dog, who busily licked up everyone's plates as they were distracted by the scene.

Ryuko looked as if she was ready to reply with a snarky or angry comment, but instead she stopped and bowed her head down towards Senketsu. After a few seconds her irate expression softened.

"Yeah, yeah, alright," Ryuko mumbled to her outfit then turned her head up to Akio. "Alright, Akio. I promised won't underestimate them."

The Mankanshokus sighed in relief, all of them going back to eating their breakfast.

Ryuko scooted a little closer to Akio, tilting her head close to him so only he would be able to hear her.

"Thanks for worrying about me," Ryuko whispered, her voice surprisingly soft. "But, I promise, I'll be fine."

Akio lifted his head, glancing at Ryuko from the corner of his eyes. Her expression was firm, but her eyes told a different story.

"I know. I'd just rather you didn't die after everything is said and done."

Ryuko smiled and turned back to her own food, using her chopsticks to plop a croquette in her mouth.

"When does it start?" Mrs. Mankanshoku piped up. "Maybe we'll try and catch it on TV."

"One o'clock," Akio replied slowly, raising an eyebrow. He didn't think the Mankanshokus had a TV.

"Oh, so you'll have some time to kill, then? I'll make sure to pack you three a boxed lunch."

Akio smiled gratefully, clasping his hands together and dipping his head slightly in gratitude.

"That'd be wonderful, Mrs. Mankanshoku. Thank you."

Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled and waved him off, standing up and walking into the kitchen to prepare their lunches.

Akio looked over to Mataro.

"You guys have a TV?"

"Nope," Mataro confirmed, munching on a croquette. He lifted his head, snapping his fingers. "But, I can get one! I'm on it, boss!"

"No, I wasn't saying to-!"

It was no use. Mataro had already scampered up and out the door.

Akio chuckled and shook his head. Today was already off to a hot start.

A few hours later, and about an hour until the conclusion of the Naturals Election, the trio found themselves in the Academy's courtyard.

Each of them carried a boxed lunch in their hands, making their way over to one of the links of the giant chain that looped around the courtyard, that was used to keep the newly created arena shackled to the school walls. It really was quite the stadium, given the short notice. The bleachers weren't half bad, and the arena itself had some giant scoreboards to display information and the like.

Without any words said to each other, the trio hopped up on the makeshift seat, all of them opening their lunches and chowing down.

Mako pulled out a thermos of tea, pouring Ryuko a cup and handing it to her.

"Here, Ryuko! Have some tea!"

Ryuko devoured a croquette, accepting Mako's offered tea.

"Yeah!"

Akio rested his elbow on his knee, placing his head in his hand.

"Now, this is a sight. It's like a live demonstration of Hungry, Hungry, Hippos."

Ryuko shot a chilling glare over at Akio, which would have sent shivers down his spine had he not found his own joke so hilarious.

"Of course she's eating like a hippo! Eating Mom's boxed lunches gives you one million horsepower! Who can blame her?"

Akio snorted loudly at Ryuko's blush, completely oblivious to the fast approaching footsteps.

"I-I am not eating like a damn hippo! Shut up-!"

"Excuse me, Matoi."

All three turned their heads up to the unexpected guest.

Aikuro Mikisugi stood lazily in front of the three, his hands stuffed into his pockets as he hunched over slightly, as he always did when he was at school.

Akio nodded at him, while Ryuko settled for a very angry stare.

"Mr. Mikisugi!" Mako hopped from her seat, pumping her fists in the air. "Did you come to cheer Ryuko on, too?"

"Yes, that's right. After all, I'm her homeroom teacher, more or less."

Aikuro pulled one of his hands from his pockets, pinning a needle into Mako's forehead, causing her to freeze completely.

Akio frowned disapprovingly at his older brother.

"Come on, man. Was that really necessary?"

Ryuko took a much more direct approach.

"You bastard!" Ryuko yelled and jumped from her seat, shaking a fist threateningly at Aikuro. "What did you do to Mako?!"

"Heh."

Aikuro ran a hand over his face and through his hair, taking his glasses off in the process.

"A freezing pressure point," He explained, going back to his usual, confident self. "I've knocked her out for a bit, that's all, so don't worry."

Ryuko looked over to Akio for confirmation, who nodded with what his brother had said.

"Fine. So what the hell do you want?"

"Drop out of the fight against the Elite Four."

Akio placed his food down, raising an eyebrow at Aikuro. While it wasn't an insane request, he sure hadn't been expecting it.

"Say what?!"

"They're on an entirely different level from the club presidents you've faced. If you're crazy enough to face even three of them in a row, I don't know what will happen to you and Senketsu."

"If you don't know, keep your opinions to yourself," Ryuko snapped, placing her hands on her hips. "Besides, Akio already gave me the same spiel."

"Oh, he did?" Aikuro asked, glancing at his brother.

"Yes, he did, so why don't you shut your mouth and watch from the sidelines? Me and Senketsu will beat Satsuki Kiryuin, and then I'll wring the truth out of her with my own two hands."

Akio watched the two warily, all the while munching on a croquette. This sure blew up fast. He didn't exactly like it when they bickered, but that's mostly because he felt guilty himself, since he was technically holding information from Ryuko, too. Thankfully she didn't remember that tidbit of information.

"Hurry up and snap Mako out of it. Talking with these three makes me feel a whole lot better than talking to you."

Sighing in resignation, Aikuro slapped back on his glasses and pulled the pin from Mako's head, unfreezing her.

"I'll be cheering for her all the way!" Mako continued where she left off as if nothing had happened. "Because she's my friend!"

"Yes, of course," Aikuro nodded sagely. "Just make sure to not push yourself too hard, Mato. Takahiro? May I have a word?"

"Sure thing."

Akio hopped down from his seat, following Aikuro as they walked out of hearing distance of Mako and Ryuko. As he walked, Akio was deathly aware of Ryuko's eyes trained on his back. Once they got a fair distance away, Akio stepped in front of his brother, crossing his arms and staring at him expectantly.

"So, what is it?"

Aikuro leaned forwards, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"Watch her closely. I wasn't lying when I said I don't know what's going to happen if she has to fight all of them in quick succession."

Akio sighed and scratched the top of his head. He could literally feel his heart drop into his stomach. He didn't need to be reminded of what had happened to Tsumugu's sister to understand how serious this could be. He wouldn't watch the same thing happen to Ryuko.

"What do you suggest we do?"

"If things take a turn for the worse, I'm going to call in the S.A.B."

Akio gasped, his eyes widening. The S.A.B? He knew that HQ only carried one of them, mostly because they were incredibly hard to make, and were only a prototype. The Special Adhesive Bullet would render any Life Fiber infused clothing completely useless, and could even possibly kill the wearer. If it were to be used against Ryuko and Senketsu, Senketsu would die on the spot, with a very strong possibility that Ryuko would as well.

"But... -"

"I don't like this anymore than you do, Akio, but you know this is what we have to do."

Turning his head, Akio watched as Ryuko and Mako sat and talked, laughing as they fed each other a croquette. Mako failed miserably, accidentally dropping the croquette down Ryuko's shirt. Ryuko

screeched, jumping up and down while shaking wildly to get the food out of her chest. If he could hear Senketsu, he'd be sure that he'd be laughing right now.

Akio's eyes softened. Unconsciously, his hand went down to his pocket, feeling the picture of Ryuko and her father that he had yet to give her.

"Fine," Akio conceded and turned back to his brother. "But, you have to let me try to defuse the situation if things go wrong. I won't let them die, Aikuro. I won't."

"As long as you promise me you won't risk your life, okay?"

"I'll try not to. Promise."

Patting his brother's shoulder, Aikuro turned and walked away, waving at Akio over his back.

"See you soon."

Akio watched his brother walk away, a million thoughts racing through his mind. Today would play out one of two ways: Ryuko would either win and everything would be fine and dandy, or Ryuko and Senketsu would get too strained from the constant fighting, and who knows what could happen then. Akio remembered very clearly what happened to Tsumugu's sister, and that was simply a prototype. Senketsu was the genuine article. If he lost control, who knows what would happen?

"So, what did that dickhead want to talk to you about?"

Akio flinched, turning to face Ryuko and Mako who were both standing behind him.

"He *is* my brother, you know."

Ryuko rolled her eyes, letting a puff of air out of her mouth to blow up a stray lock of hair.

"Fine. What did your *brother* have to talk about?"

"Nothing of importance," Akio lied, pulling out his phone to check the time. "It's almost one. You should get ready."

Mako jumped in the air out of shock, bringing her watch up to her face to check the time.

"AIEEEE! All the good seats will be gone!"

Bolting towards the stairs that lead to the bleachers, Mako gave one last wave to Ryuko before she ran out of sight.

"Good luck, Ryuko! We'll be cheering for you!"

Ryuko grinned watching her best friend leave. Akio had to give it to her, she didn't seem that worried about today in the slightest.

"Well, you better go run after her before you lose her," Ryuko said and turned, walking towards the giant arena in the center. "Wish me luck!"

"Ryuko, wait."

Akio reached out and grabbed Ryuko's hand, stopping her in her tracks.

Ryuko stopped and looked at their two hands, then to Akio, raising an eyebrow in question.

"Just... Just remember what you promised me, alright?"

Ryuko blinked dumbly at Akio's words.

Recovering quickly, a genuine smile began to make its way onto her face. Placing her other hand on top his, she squeezed it gently.

"I'll remember, Akio."

Still smiling, she reached up to flick Akio in the forehead.

"Jeez, I don't remember you being such an emotional worrywart."

Breaking his hold on her, Ryuko walked off towards the giant stage, waving to Akio as she walked away.

"Once I win, you owe me another dinner, you got that?"

Akio watched her walk away, his expression dropping.

"Sure thing," He mumbled, turning to walk towards the bleachers that Mako had ran to.

Something in his gut told him that he would never get to make her that dinner, but maybe that was just him worrying too much.

The sheer size of the crowd astounded Akio as he made his way through the bleachers. The place was literally packed to the brim. Even with each seat nearly taken, it didn't take Akio that long to find Mako in the crowd. Her excessive waving certainly helped.

However, what he wasn't expecting, was that she'd have a guest.

"Akio!" Mako exclaimed upon seeing her friend. "Look who wants to sit with us!"

Oh, Akio was looking alright.

Uzu Sanageyama sat beside Mako with his arms crossed, his head turned slightly away from Akio in indifference.

Today he wasn't wearing his usual Goku Uniform. Instead, he wore a green tracksuit, matching his green hair and green blindfold. His face had a few bruises on it, and his lip was busted, but the thing that stood out most to Akio was the thick bandage that was wrapped around his hand.

"I don't *want* to sit with you," Uzu corrected annoyed. "But, I'm a No Star just like you two now, so I might as well sit and watch with you."

"You're a No Star now?" Akio asked, taking a seat on the other side of Mako.

"Indeed. I lost, so I got my Goku Uniform taken away. Part of the rules."

"I see," Akio hummed, his eyes drifting towards Uzu's banged up hand. He had to say something now, or else it'd just eat up at him. "Listen, Sanageyama, I'm really sorry about-"

"Don't," Uzu interrupted, raising a hand to cut him off. "My hand is fine, Takahiro. It's just a flesh wound. You beat me fair and square. Don't insult me by trying to apologize for it."

"But-"

"If you say anything else about it, I'm going to shove my fist into your mouth."

"..Alright," Akio smirked. "I won't then."

"And besides, / won't be apologizing to you when I beat you next time."

"Next time?"

"Of course," Uzu eyed Akio, grinning slightly. "Did you really think I'd lose to someone like you and not ask for a rematch?"

"If you're really looking to lose again, be my guest. I won't turn you down."

Mako watched the two with wide eyes, her pupils darting back and forth between the two teens who now had their eyes trained on the stage below.

"Wow, it's always amazing watching two people become best friends."

Neither of the two answered that.

"Looks like it's starting," Akio noted as Ryuko and the rest of the Elite Four took their positions.

"So it is," Uzu replied quickly.

Satsuki Kiryuin stood on the edge of the Academy tower, her hands on the hilt of her blade as its point rested on the ground. Tapping the ground, the sound echoed throughout the stadium, quieting down the entire crowd.

"The Elite Four have requested to face Ryuko Matoi in one-on-one combat!" Satsuki announced, immediately getting down to business. "This will be a king of the hill final battle!"

Akio glanced over at Uzu.

"This was going to happen all along, wasn't it?"

Uzu shrugged, but that was enough of an answer for Akio.

Of course it was. How else would the Naturals Elections end?

Satsuki turned her head towards Ryuko, meeting her gaze.

"Matoi! Battle the Elite Four and emerge victorious! Do so, and I will tell you the details of your father's death."

Akio's eyes widened. If Ryuko proved victorious, she'd give her all of the answers just like that?

A frown grew on his face as he examined his friend down on the stage. Akio could feel Ryuko's blood boil from up in the stands. He knew there was no way she'd allow herself to lose here. That didn't

bode well for her. She'd lose a lot more than just information if she lost her hold on herself here.

"The schedule of the battles will go as followed: first, will be Gamagoori. Then, Inumuta, followed by Jakazure. Defeat these three, and you will get your answers."

Gamagoori jumped from his pillar, landing hard on the stage, shaking the entire thing down to its foundations.

The giant of a man straightened his back, his eyes boring hole into Ryuko's.

"I am Lady Satsuki's impenetrable shield! Prepare yourself, Matoi! Our fight begins now!"

"Fine by me!"

Ryuko grabbed the pin on her wrist, pulling it out hard. Bright flashes of light emitted from Ryuko's glove, and then Senketsu expanded outwards, spreading apart each and every string of his fabric before coming back together and constricting against Ryuko's form.

"Life Fiber Synchronize, Kamui Senketsu!"

Akio had seen her transform a few times now, but he still couldn't help but be amazed by it. On all accounts it looked dangerous, and downright painful, but the calm look on Ryuko's face as if it was just another normal thing really spoke great lengths about the connection that the two shared.

With Ryuko transformed, the two opponents stared each other down, neither one budging an inch in their expressions.

By now, the sky above had changed to a blood red. It was as if the sky itself knew how much blood would be shed on this day.

"Hmph."

The three studded stars on Gamagoori's collar began to sparkle and glow.

"Consider that your final transformation, Matoi!"

Gamagoori stood patiently as his uniform disappeared, and three gold stars took its place, rotating slowly around Gamagoori's now naked body. A beam of light connected the three stars together as they flew upwards, meeting up together above Gamagoori's head and crashing down upon him.

When the bright yellow light dispersed, Gamagoori's Three Star uniform was revealed. Nothing had changed in its design since Akio had seen it last. Straps of cloth were bound all around Gamagoori's body, pressing tightly against him. A plastic ball appeared in his mouth, presumably for him to bite down on. Needless to say, Akio couldn't help but get an odd feeling from looking at Gamagoori's Three Star transformation.

"Three Star Goku Uniform: Shackle Regalia!"

Steam hissed out from Gamagoori's mouth as he stood there unmoving, still as a statue.

Ryuko growled and stepped towards the giant, so close so that she had to look upwards to meet his eyes.

"Hey."

"What?"

"Do you want to fight or not?"

"Well, of course," Ryuko answered simply.

"Then why aren't you attacking me?!" Gamagoori exclaimed.

"Oh, please," Ryuko smirked. "Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"Hmmm?"

"I know that your Goku Uniform absorbs the power of any attacks against you and turns it back on the attacker," She explained smugly. "You know I can't just attack you."

Akio frowned and crossed his arms, leaning back in his seat. By all means, that was sound logic. But, Gamagoori was Gamagoori. He wasn't that dense. He had to have known that, too.

And from the look on Uzu's face, he seemed to know that Gamagoori had something in store as well.

"I see," Gamagoori replied. "So you really are a fool."

Ryuko blinked. "Come again?"

"Do you really think that I hadn't anticipated something so obvious?"

Akio sighed and rubbed his closed eyelids. At this point he wished that they'd just get on with it already. As luck would have it, he'd get that wish.

Several straps of cloth separated from Gamagoori's Shackle Regalia, stretching out and then slapping against Gamagoori's tied up body.

He was... whipping himself?

"How is it that *Gamagoori* is the weirdest of you four?" Akio asked Uzu.

Uzu snorted and shook his head.

"You've clearly never seen Inumuta's search history."

Ryuko seemed as surprised as everyone else. She stood there uncertainly, her scissor blade in hand, but choosing not to strike.

"What the-"

Gamagoori inflated like a balloon as he still slapped away at himself.

"Even if no one disciplines me, I discipline myself!"

As he talked, he grew even more in size. His uniform began to tremble, threatening to burst at any second.

"I use my own techniques to punish myself! I punish and punish and punish myself, and bring myself to a climax!"

Akio couldn't help but ask himself why Gamagoori kept using the word 'climax.' It really painted the wrong picture.

"This is my Higi Jijo-Jibaku!"

Ryuko took a few steps backwards, unsure on how to proceed.

"Now, let me show you!"

Rays of purple and yellow light began to shoot out of the crevices of Gamagoori's Shackle Regalia. The straps that had bound themselves to his body unfurled, revealing the sight underneath.

"Three-Star Goku Uniform: Scourge Regalia!"

Akio felt his jaw drop. Gamagoori's second transformation was impressive indeed. He was wearing a suit of black and orange armor, with several spikes lining his shoulders, knees, and arms. The helmet he wore reminded Akio a bit like the one Iron Man wore in those comic books he used to read, minus the plastic ball that was still inserted in Gamagoori's mouth.

The straps of cloth that once were tied around Gamagoori's body shot forward, their form turning into that of a barbed whip.

Hundreds of whips flew towards Ryuko, leaving her no choice but to try and dodge them, with little to no success. Akio could hear the

smacking sounds from here as the barbed whips slapped against Ryuko's unprotected skin.

The last whip sent Ryuko flying across the stage, rolling on the ground before coming to a complete stop. But, that didn't stop Gamagoori from his barrage.

"What are you waiting for?!" Gamagoori bellowed, punctuating his question with a whip to Ryuko's behind.

Akio frowned. He really, *really*, didn't like that.

"If you fall out of the battle arena, you lose right then and there!" The giant continued, his whips never stopping their striking.

"Nobody said that was a rule!" Ryuko objected.

"It was a rule yesterday, so it's a rule today! Are we clear, Matoi?"

Despite the hundreds of whips flying in the air around Ryuko, she stood up, her scissor blade poised and ready.

"Crystal clear!"

The whips that were still levitating in the air all began to retract, smacking Ryuko a few times and knocking her back down on their way back.

"You acknowledge that a contest of endurance against me is futile? What's your next move, Matoi?"

Gamagoori literally had the perfect defense, *and* perfect offense. He could sit back and get pummeled, and once he had charged enough energy, he could just explode with the ferocity of a thousand whips. Even the most skilled fighter would be hard-pressed to dodge every single one in a fight. Things weren't boding well for Ryuko, but she was far from out of the fight just yet.

Ryuko rose to her feet, raising her scissor blade.

"In that case, I'll just adopt standard tactics!"

The handle on Ryuko's scissor blade came apart, making the hilt itself longer.

Ryuko darted forwards, swinging the lengthy blade at the center of Gamagoori's chest.

"Finishing move: Sen-i-Soshitsu!"

Both combatants stood still for a few seconds. Nothing happened.

Gamagoori turned around, his body already inflating once again.

"Huh?!"

Ryuko jumped away, creating distance between the two.

An attack like that would have no way of working on Gamagoori when he was in the Shackle Regalia transformation. Both Akio and Ryuko saw how impervious it was against the Airsoft Automobile Club. They had even rammed three cars into the man and he hadn't budged an inch. There was absolutely no way Ryuko could hope to break his shell by just swinging her blade at it.

And she knew it as well. At least Akio hoped she did.

"My Shackle Regalia's surface is cloth armor, reinforced by means of special powers," Gamagoori explained, even though it was rather obvious. "To absorb its Life Fibers, you will have to pierce this cloth armor, and thrust your blade into the uniform proper!"

Ryuko grabbed her scissor blade with both hands.

"I'll just have to cut all the way to the inside, then!"

Running forwards, Ryuko brought her scissor blade back and swung down hard against Gamagoori's midsection. The blade bounced off,

sending Ryuko flying back. With her attack, Gamagoori inflated even larger.

"Is that wise?" Gamagoori asked the most obvious question. "If you attack me, I become that much stronger!"

Gamagoori's Shackle Regalia exploded, revealing his Scourge Regalia.

"Scourge Regalia!"

The hundreds of whips shot forwards once again, knocking Ryuko across the stage.

"Ryuko!" Mako cried from her spot beside Akio.

The whips continued to smack against Ryuko's bare skin, slapping her back and forth around the stage.

Getting smacked one more time, Ryuko landed on her feet, hurriedly holding up her scissor blade in an attempt to block some of the oncoming whips. There was no way she'd be able to withstand the barrage for long like this. Her arms and legs were already shaking from the exertion.

"I told you! I am Lady Satsuki's ultimate shield! I will crush you here and now!"

Akio winced. Things weren't looking good for Ryuko. At this rate, she'd lose in the next few minutes. If only there were a way for her to get to Gamagoori when he has his Scourge Regalia transformation on! At least then she'd be able to get some attacks on his body without his Shackle Regalia blocking it. As of now, however, that seemed impossible. Gamagoori's thousand-whip offensive was near impenetrable. In the storm of barbed whips, Ryuko could hardly walk forwards, let alone stand.

"Like hell you will!" Ryuko protested, still as stubborn as ever.
"There's no way I'm about to lose to you!"

Changing tactics, Ryuko elected to slash at the whips instead of blocking them, but even then she wasn't getting much done. For each whip destroyed, at least two more took its place.

"What are you even fighting for?" Gamagoori asked. "Out of rage for your father's murder? You're petty! Petty, petty, petty!"

Gamagoori punctuated his statement by increasing the ferocity and speed of his whips.

"If you challenge her out of a personal vendetta, a great being like Satsuki Kiryuin won't be budged!"

"What?!"

"And not just her! You'll never be able to defeat me, either!"

Several of the whips came together, forming a single, giant one. The giant whip shot forwards, slamming Ryuko in her chest and sending her flying across the stage.

To stop herself from falling, Ryuko slammed her scissor blade into the very side of the stage. She lost her gripping on the blade, but the straps on her top got caught on the hilt, stopping her from falling completely. It did leave her in a very compromising position, but at least she hadn't lost.

Of course, the cameras chose that moment to zoom in on Ryuko, showing her near bare chest for all to see on the huge television screens on the side of the stage.

Akio turned his head away from the screen as the crowd around him jumped from their seats, cheering the cameramen on for capturing such a glorious shot.

"Oh, gosh!" Mako cried, her nose gushing blood.

"Tsk," Uzu clicked his tongue, turning his head away as well.
"Disgraceful."

Thankfully, Ryuko grabbed onto Senketsu's straps, pulling herself up and back onto the stage.

"So, not only are you a fool, you're a sore loser."

"What's bad around here is your luck," Ryuko countered as she adjusted the straps on her Senketsu. "The bad luck of getting stuck fighting me!"

Ryuko charged forwards once again, swinging her scissor blade wildly at Gamagoori's Shackle Regalia.

Akio sighed and ran a hand through his hair. There was no way she was going to win doing that, and she had to have known that as well. What was she thinking?

"It looks like Matoi has all but lost," Uzu spoke. "Just look at her. Maybe she isn't as good a fighter as I thought."

"Stow it, Sanageyama," Akio growled. "She beat you once, too, you know. What does that say about you, then?"

Uzu shrugged, not taking any insult in Akio's statement.

"Regardless, if she keeps this up she's just going to lose."

Akio didn't say anything and turned his attention back to the fight. He didn't need Uzu to say that to know it already.

Gamagoori's body inflated once again, his bindings trembling as they prepared to blow apart.

"Struggle all you want, you have don't have a chance of winning!
Learn your place as a student and quietly accept my discipline!
SCOURGE REGALIA!"

Gamagoori's bindings unraveled, once again revealing the terror of his Scourge Regalia underneath.

The barrage of spiked whips flew at Ryuko once again, threatening to defeat her once and for all.

Ryuko brought her scissor blade up and began spinning it wildly in her hand, creating a propeller that destroyed any whip that happened to touch it.

"As if! If I lose to the likes of you, I'll never learn who killed my dad no matter how long I try!"

One of the cut up bits of whip smacked against Gamagoor's helmet, causing him to clench his hands in anger.

"It still hasn't sunk through that skull of yours? I am Disciplinary Committee Chair Ira Gamagoori! By shackling myself and whipping myself mercilessly, I tried to set an example for the students. 'See my behavior and correct your own!' They would mend their ways of their own accord. To impose order on the independence of Honnouji Academy's students!"

Gamagoori's form towered over Ryuko as he talked, his eyes glowing a bright white as his whips increased in ferocity.

"The Shackle Regalia is the very embodiment of that desire!" He continued. "And to those who still refuse to learn, I held back my tears and gave them a taste of the cleansing whip. That is the Scourge Regalia! If you refuse the whip of love, then you leave me no choice!"

Gamagoori's jaw crunched down on the plastic ball in his mouth, smashing it completely. He stood straight and tall, throwing his arms back as he prepared his vicious attack.

"Let me show you the true terror of the Shackle Regalia!"

Three metal shackles appeared in each of his hands, the metal lined with razor sharp spikes.

"Ryuko Matoi, your independence is revoked! I'm going to mold you into a proper student!"

Gamagoori threw the metal circles at Ryuko, never seeming to run out of ammunition. He threw one after one, never showing any signs on stopping.

"Where do you get off, anyway, modifying that sailor uniform into that slutty outfit?!"

Akio grimaced. Was Gamagoori really trying to 'discipline' her in the middle of their fight? Really?

"How utterly depraved! How utterly deviant!"

"What about your precious Lady Sastuki, then?!" Ryuko shot back.

"She is an exception! Her form is made up of her iron will and well-trained body!"

"Don't give me that self-serving garbage!"

One of the spikes hit Ryuko's hand, knocking her scissor blade from her grip. With her defenseless, the rest of the thrown shackles wrapped around Ryuko's body, wrapping her up completely.

"Alright, Ryuko Matoi, I'm going to mold you into shape now!"

Gamagoori's hands turned into two large slabs of metal, with a literal molding of a student on the inside, everything from the student outfit to the body's shape.

"This mold is of the ideal, proper female high school student. 'A proper spirit starts with a proper shape.'"

Gamagoori slammed the two slabs into Ryuko, catching her in-between the two and crushing her.

"Have a taste of this mold, and reflect on your wicked ways!"

The molding began to generate vast amounts of electricity, shocking Ryuko violently as she was stuck between the two.

"Ryuko!" Akio and Mako cried, both standing in their seats.

"Struggle! Struggle!" Gamagoori laughed as Ryuko writhed in pain.

And just like that, with a few words to Senketsu, Ryuko's pained and worried expression changed into one of confidence.

"She has something planned?" Akio mumbled to himself as he sat back down.

Several bright, flashes of light began to emit from the center of Ryuko. The shackles that bound her began to spin wildly, causing Gamagoori to let up in his squishing of her.

Ryuko spun out of his grip, the shackles falling from her body.

"Clever," Uzu admitted, albeit begrudgingly.

It really was. Ryuko had used the power of her transformation to break free of the shackles. The only problem now, however, was that Senketsu wasn't in his more powerful form.

Ryuko hopped across the stage, creating a considerable distance from the two. Satisfied with the distance, she doubled over slightly, gasping in air as she tried to recover.

"Oh, so my words finally got through to you? I see that you have returned to a more proper appearance!"

"Who would listen to you, you big pervert?"

"In that case, taste the ultimate whip of love!"

Gamagoori leaned backwards, and a very large, very thick whip shot from his waist, flying directly towards the now weakened Ryuko.

The whip slammed into her body, threatening once more to throw her over the side.

"... Oh my God," Akio murmured.

Those two were more clever than he gave them credit for.

Senketsu bit down hard into the whip as Ryuko grabbed at several of the other smaller whips, as well as biting down on one herself. In that position, there was no way that the two of them would fall from their spot.

The whips retracted, bringing Ryuko in towards Gamagoori's chest. As he switched back into his Shackle Regalia, all of the whips tied back around his body, effectively burying Ryuko into Gamagoori's chest.

"Heh, so you're applying the idea that 'even the hunter spares the bird that flies to his bosom?' I warn you, I'm not that sentimental!"

The bindings tightened against Ryuko, threatening to strangle her completely.

"Having trouble breathing? Without your scissor blade, you have no way of fighting back!"

Uzu shook his head and clicked his tongue.

"It looks like your girlfriend has all but lost, Takahiro."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure," Akio smirked, leaning back in his seat smugly. "At this point, she's all but won."

"Hmmm? Why would-" Uzu flinched, his head turning up. "What? What is this I'm sensing?"

Several flashes of light began to flash all around Gamagoori's chest, and several red blades tore through Gamagoori's bindings.

Gamagoori screamed in pain and surprise as he began to stumble around. The blades grew in length and width, tearing Gamagoori apart even more.

"Senketsu Senjin!"

With a fierce battle cry, Ryuko tore out of Gamagoori's Shackle Regalia, pushing off of his chest with her feet and jumping across the stage.

"It appears that she's stealing your moves, Takahiro," Uzu noted.

Akio smirked and shook his head.

It wasn't only that she stole.

Ryuko stood tall and proud, her outfit now lined with several sharp spikes and blades. Akio smirked even wider when he noticed that three, long, sharp claws had jutted out from above Ryuko's knuckles, startling similar to Akio's in their design.

"She turned her Kamui into a blade?" Gamagoori cried, as surprised at the turn of events as anyone else.

Ryuko leaped forwards, grabbing her scissor blade and flying at the now defenseless Gamagoori.

"You don't have enough energy to transform into your Scourge Regalia!"

A bright, red flame erupted from the backside of Senketsu, sending Ryuko flying even faster towards Gamagoori as he tried to recover.

"Your Life Fibers are totally exposed now!"

With another battle cry, Ryuko swung her blade down as she flew past Gamagoori.

"Finishing move: Sen-i-Soshitsu!"

Gamagoori exploded in a burst of light. His Three Star burst apart, leaving the Disciplinary Committee Chair completely naked.

"I-impossible!"

As Ryuko straightened, the Life Fibers of Gamagoori's uniform drifted towards her, getting sucked up by Senketsu as he let out puffs of steam.

Gamagoori's body crashed against the stage, cracking the surface and kicking up a cloud of thick dust.

For a moment, everyone was silent. Some had difficulty believing what they had just seen, while others were too excited or happy to speak. For a split second, Akio worried that she might receive the same reception he had the other day, but his fear was for naught.

The second that the television screen blinked the words 'Round 1 victor: Ryuko Matoi,' the crowd erupted into a fit of cheers and clapping, Akio and Mako among them.

"You did it, Ryuko!" Mako cheered, flailing her arms about wildly.

Akio grinned from ear to ear, clapping hard as he cheered.

"Good job, Ryuko!"

One down, two to go, and it was Houka Inumuta that was next in line.

Author's Notes:

So there ya have it!

Lots of stuff going on in this chapter. Ryuko's beaten the first of the Elite Four, Mikisugi's plans have been revealed, and a whole bunch of other stuff. Just what is Akio going to do in the next few chapters?

Anyhow, thanks for reading everyone! I hope you all enjoyed it!

In the next chapter, we'll get to the fight with Inumuta!

Until next time!

Links to the Past

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next installment of Before My Body is Dry!

Before we do anything, I'd like to give a shout out to fellow author and friend, CrimsonHeresy. He helped me a lot with this chapter, as well as be someone who I could bounce ideas off of. He actually has a Kill la Kill story of his own out right now, Never Losing the Way, so you guys should go check it out! Personally, I think you'll really like it! I know I did.

Well, last chapter we finished up with Gamagoori. This chapter, we'll get to Inumuta. Sort of. I didn't want to spend another whole chapter just retelling a fight scene, so I decided to add a completely different scene here for Akio.

This chapter take a bit of a different turn from the other ones, so I hope you guys like it.

Anyhow, let's get on with the show!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

As the dust settled from the ending of Gamagoori and Ryuko's fight, Ryuko was already ready for the next one to begin.

"That's one down, Kiryuin!" Ryuko shouted up to Satsuki, her scissor blade resting lazily on her shoulders.

Akio leaned back in his seat, resting his back against the stone behind him. Next up was Houka Inumuta, Satsuki's intelligence and strategy chief.

If Gamagoori was Satsuki's shield, Inumuta was her eyes. He had data on nearly everyone in Honnou City. Hell, Akio wouldn't even be surprised if Inumuta had already found out about his Nudist Beach connections. He prayed he didn't, but Inumuta was good. Too good. There was always a constant fear in the back of Akio's mind that Inumuta and Satsuki were always one step ahead of him. After all, Inumuta had been able to detect Akio's presence when he had broke into the sewing club, even with power cut off to the whole Academy.

To be honest, out of all of the Elite Four, Inumuta scared him the most. Not because of his fighting prowess, but because of his knowledge. Akio only hoped that it wouldn't translate into his fight against Ryuko.

"I suppose that means that I will be your next opponent, Matoi."

Inumuta made his way down the stairs that connected his pillar to the stage, pushing his glasses back up on his nose.

Despite his lesser stature, he still walked with poise and confidence. From the look on his face, he had no plans on losing this fight.

"You are free to rest, Matoi!" Satsuki called out to her from her perch.

"Hmmm," Akio hummed to himself. That actually might not be a bad-

"Get real! I gotta waste your chumps and then come after you!"

Akio sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course, Ryuko had thrown any hope for her to not overexert herself out the window already.

Mako bit her thumbs nervously, apparently having the same fear as Akio had.

Fights like these can take a great toll on your body, and by Ryuko avoiding taking even the tiniest of breaks, she was already making a

risky decision. Akio just hoped that it wouldn't come back to bite her later.

"Okay, let's get to it," Ryuko said, getting straight to the point.

"So impatient," Inumuta sighed. "Still, I hate to waste time, too."

Inumuta grabbed what looked to be a phone from his pocket and stared at its screen as several bits and pieces of information about his opponent appeared.

Ryuko stood there with her hands on her hips, apparently content with letting Inumuta take his sweet time to start.

Mako turned to Akio, poking him lightly on the shoulder to catch his attention.

"Hey, Akio?"

"Yes?"

"Is Ryuko gonna be okay?"

"Of course she is, Mako," Akio assured, patting her knee. "She'll kick their asses, you know that."

"Yeah, I know," Mako whispered glumly. "I just wish she was allowed to have assistants. Then we could be right down there, looking after her!"

"I know, Mako. I know."

The hair on the back of Akio's neck stood up on end, and deep down in his gut he felt the sudden urge to scoot away from Mako.

No sooner had he done so than Gamagoori came lumbering towards the trio, plopping down in the seat Akio had just vacated without even looking first. Other than the loin cloth he wore around his waist, the giant of a man was completely naked.

Uzu turned towards Gamagoori, nodding slightly.

"Gamagoori."

Gamagoori returned the nod.

"Sanageyama."

Akio couldn't say he was expecting anything more.

"G-Gamagoori!" Mako stammered at the sight of the beast next to her. "A-and you're half-naked!"

"Don't be afraid, Mankanshoku. I am now a No Star, the same rank as you three. To observe this battle, it's only fitting that I do so from the spectator seats where the No Stars are gathered."

Gamagoori raised his arm, his fist tightening around a piece of cloth in his palm. As to why that piece of cloth was so important to him, Akio had no clue.

"Lady Satsuki, Ira Gamagoori will surely work his way back up from this shame! I won't allow your kindness towards me to be in vain!"

"Oh, I get it!"

Mako hopped up from her seat, throwing a few punches in the air in the general vicinity of Gamagoori.

"You want to fight me right here and now, right?"

Mako closed in on the Disciplinary Chair, her expression turning serious.

"I'm cheering on Ryuko with all I've got, so I won't let anyone interfere, not even you!"

"How amusing!" Gamagoori replied with bravado. "Even with you cheering her on, Lady Satsuki's stronghold won't budge one iota!"

"But it did budge! You lost, remember?"

Uzu began to snicker, stopping immediately when Gamagoori glared at him and his gigantic body towered over his.

"She's got you there, Gamagoori," Akio laughed, which in turned caused Uzu to begin snickering again, much to Gamagoori's dismay.

Gamagoori trembled with anger and shame, eventually exploding out of his seat and yelling vehemently towards the stage.

"Inumuta, win! Trounce her thoroughly and utterly!"

Not to be outdone, Mako followed suit.

"Ryuko, take him out!"

"This ought to be fun," Uzu sighed, resting his head in his hands.

Akio chuckled, stopping when he felt someone else tap on his shoulder.

"Yes?" Akio asked as he turned in his seat to face whomever had poked him.

A One Star student stood in front of him, his hands behind his back and his posture straight as an arrow. Given the fact that Akio was sitting with two of the Elite Four, he must have been somewhat intimidated.

"You're Akio Takahiro, correct?"

"I am," He nodded, raising an eyebrow. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," The One Star answered, shuffling his feet a tiny bit. "You have visitors waiting for you at the docks."

"Visitors?"

That was strange. Who in the hell would visit him? Other than his parents, there wasn't a soul in the universe that he could imagine would come to visit him.

"Yes. They said they were your parents."

Well, there's that. It still definitely surprised him. He really wasn't expecting his parents to drop by, even if they were the only ones that would visit him. He hadn't heard from them in a few months, and the last time he did hear from them, they were currently traveling the world since they were both officially retired. The last he heard was that they were somewhere in the States. That's quite the journey to visit him and Aikuro in Honnou City.

"Alright..." Akio replied slowly. He glanced over at the other three, who were all watching him now with different levels of curiosity. Uzu and Gamagoori were only glancing over at him, while Mako had fully turned towards him to listen in on the conversation.

"Wow, your parents? You really should go and see them, Akio," Mako suggested. "I'll hold your spot!"

"I don't know," Akio murmured, his eyes darting back and forth from the stage and Mako. "I'd rather not miss this."

"Don't worry," Mako waved him off and pulled out her cell phone. "If anything important happens, I'll text you. Besides, I'm sure Ryuko would understand. They are your parents, after all."

"Well, alright. Still, I plan on making this quick," Akio said and stood, turning back to the One Star. "The docks you said?"

The One Star nodded and walked away abruptly, his job complete.

"I'll be back soon, I guess."

"Sounds good!" Mako answered cheerily, waving an enthusiastic goodbye to him. "Have fun!"

The docks always intrigued Akio. It might have been the sheer diversity you could find there that always caught his interest. There were fishermen coming in with their hauls, cargo ships dropping off their loads, family members coming to visit their children. It seemed like there was always a number of different things going on.

There were rarely any tourists, though. Sure, there was the occasional family coming to visit someone, or some parents coming to scout out the school they were sending their kids to, but other than that, there was hardly any tourism. Not that Akio was surprised. There wasn't much to see here.

Akio inhaled deeply through his nose, savoring the smell of the saltwater. Another reason he liked the harbor was because he just simply loved the sea. It was always able to calm him down, regardless of the circumstance. It might have been the beauty of the water itself, or just the fond memories he had regarding the ocean. Back in the day, his father had actually taught him and Aikuro how to pilot a boat. They'd spend the whole day sailing, ending with them fishing as a family and eating whatever they had caught. It was one of Akio's favorite memories.

Funnily enough, Akio was always better at boating than Aikuro. Not that he was bad, but when it came to steering a boat, Akio had the better skill set. The same couldn't be said about automobiles, though, as Aikuro liked to remind him of that on a daily basis.

Akio exhaled slowly, feeling his spirits lift already. Maybe this wasn't as bad as he thought. Thinking about how much fun he had had with his parents had really gotten him into the mood to see them. It had been awhile since he saw them last.

Looking around, he tried to spot his parents out in the crowd.

They were nowhere to be found.

"That's weird," Akio whispered to himself, scratching his head. "That One Star said they would-"

Akio's voice died in his throat.

There, nearly a hundred feet across from him, stood two familiar looking adults, with a single, unfamiliar looking child.

Both of the adults seemed to be in their late thirties, nearly pushing forty. One of them was male, with cropped brown hair that was already graying at the base. His deep, green eyes were traveling back and forth around the pier, seemingly looking for something. He rubbed his clean shaven face, giving Akio the indication that he was quite lost.

The other was a woman, with similar brown hair that went down to her shoulders. Unlike the man, she was much more slender in stature, and shorter as well. While he was pushing 6'4, she would be lucky to break 5'10. They did share the same eye color, however, but her face was much more structured than the man's, as his was more rounded.

The young girl that was with them could be no older than five, and cuter than a button. She had big, innocent green eyes, as well as her mother's long, brown hair, but still had a bit of a baby face. She actually looked a lot like Akio did when he was that age.

The woman's eyes slowly scanned the dock, eventually landing on Akio. She stared intently at him for a long while, eventually realizing just who he was. Gasping, she brought her hand up to cover her trembling lower lip and to stifle a sob.

They both stared at each other for what felt like hours. The woman nudged her husband with her elbow, motioning towards Akio with her head without ever moving her eyes away from him.

The man's eyes locked onto Akio as well, widening when he caught sight of him.

Taking a deep breath, the man grabbed his wife and daughter by the hand and began walking towards Akio

Akio didn't say anything, nor did he move from his spot. He wanted to be anywhere but here right now, but he couldn't move a single muscle even if he wanted to. A thousand thoughts raced through his head, paralyzing him. Why were they here? What did they want? How did they find him? Why had it taken them eighteen years to look him up?

Despite these questions, he was transfixed by the sight of the little girl that was looking shyly at him as they walked ever closer.

That prompted the question that was most important to him. Just who was this girl with them? That question repeated itself over and over in Akio's mind, but he knew the answer was as clear as day.

That... that kid... is my... my...

"Are... are you Akio Takahiro?" The man asked timidly once the three came to a stop in front of Akio.

Akio swallowed, moistening his completely dry throat.

"Yes," He croaked. "Yes, I am."

The husband and wife shared a look and nodded, then the wife took a step forwards towards Akio.

"We don't know if you remember us," She began quietly, fiddling with her fingers. "But, we're... we're-"

"Kasumi and Hiroshi Takahiro," Akio answered for her. "My birthparents."

Kasumi Takahiro nodded and smiled nervously at her son.

"That's right," She answered and motioned towards the child that was now hiding behind her father's legs. "And this here is-"

"My sister, I'm guessing?"

"This little princess here is Akiko," Hiroshi grinned and patted his daughter on the head. The little girl hugged herself closer to her father's leg as she looked up at Akio from beneath her bangs. "She's a little shy at first, but I assure you, she's a ball full of energy at home."

Hiroshi laughed at his own statement, causing Akio to liven up just a tiny bit. The similarities in their names were not lost on him, either.

Pushing down his own mixture of emotions, Akio knelt down in front of the little girl.

He could do this. He could do this. This little girl was his sister. This little girl had nothing to do with his parents decisions. He could at least be kind to her.

He could do this.

"Hello there," Akio greeted her as sweetly as he could given the circumstance. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

The little girl scooted a little further behind her father's leg, burying her face into his pant leg. Occasionally she'd look at Akio, her eyes always drifting to the three long scars that marred the right side of his face.

Noticing this, Akio brought a hand up and slowly rubbed the three grooves.

"Oh, these? I bet these make me look pretty scary, huh?"

The girl only nodded slightly in response, but she did keep her eyes on Akio's this time.

Mr. and Mrs. Takahiro shared a look. They were nearly shaking in their boots out of nervousness. They had absolutely no clue how this was going to turn out.

So far, not so great.

"Wanna know how I got them?"

Akiko nodded again, slowly coming out of her shell.

"I got in a fight with a big bad monkey named Bozo. He got pretty mad when I stole a couple of his bananas."

Akiko giggled, her head slowly scooting farther and farther away from her father's leg.

"R-really?"

The two parents sighed in relief, their worried expressions quickly turning to ones of joy. That had gone a lot better than they had expected, at least.

"Really, really. My name's Akio, by the way," Akio said softly and outstretched his hand towards her.

Akiko looked back and forth between Akio's hand and Akio himself, eventually coming to a decision and extending her own hand.

"I'm Akiko," The little girl squeaked as Akio shook her hand. "Are you my big brother?"

"That I am," Akio grinned. "It's nice to finally meet you."

Letting go of her hand, Akio stood and looked at his parents, his smile disappearing.

"There's a coffee shop not too far from here. We should talk."

Mr. and Mrs. Takahiro nodded, falling into step with Akio as he lead them through the not so crowded streets of Honnou City.

The four walked in complete and utter silence. The two parents were completely unsure as to what to say to their estranged son, while

Akio just didn't want to say anything. A thousand thoughts raced through his head, but he didn't know where to begin.

Akiko, on the other hand, was already warming up to Akio, and had even stepped a little closer to him as they walked on.

"Do you live here?" She asked.

"I do," Akio nodded, glancing down at the tiny girl. "What do you think of it?"

"It's big," Akiko breathed in awe as her eyes darted all around. "And kinda smushed together."

"That it is," Akio laughed.

"Do you live here by yourself?"

"No, I live with my brother and some friends."

"Really?" Akiko's eyes sparkled at the prospect of having another brother she hadn't known about. "Is he my brother, too?"

Mr. and Mrs. Takahiro winced at her question, casting worried glances over at Akio, who purposefully ignored them.

"No... no, he is not."

Akiko tilted her head to the side, confused on how that worked.

"But if he's your brother, that would make him my brother, wouldn't it?"

"Normally, that would be true. It's not in this case, however."

Akiko nodded slowly, still not entirely sure on what he meant but she let it pass. She had more important questions she wanted to ask her new older brother, anyways.

"What's your favorite food?"

"Hmmm..." Akio placed a finger on his chin as he thought. "I'd say ramen. You?"

"Chocolate!"

"A very good choice."

"What's your favorite color?"

"Red," Akio grinned. "You?"

"Red!"

"Well, how about that," Akio chuckled as he lead the three around the corner and towards the coffee shop he had in mind. "Anyway, we're here."

Grabbing one of the tables on the patio for the four, Akio took their orders and went up to get them, eventually coming back with three coffees and a box of juice.

Katsumi and Hiroshi nodded their thanks as they accepted their coffees, and Akiko clapped her hands excitedly when Akio handed her a box of juice and a coloring book he had found near the counter. That had been a nice coincidence.

The three sipped on their coffee without speaking, while Akiko hummed a tune as she colored the coloring book with a handful of different crayons.

"So," Akio began, placing his drink down. "First things first, I suppose. What exactly are you here for?"

"Well," Hiroshi put his drink down as well and leaned forwards in his seat. "After we stopped receiving updates about you, we got a little bit worried. So we decided enough was enough and we saved up enough money to come out here."

Akio furrowed his brow. This was news to him.

"Updates?"

"That's right," Katsumi nodded. "Aikuro, had been sending us letters about you for several years now. We haven't heard anything since he mentioned you'd be attending Honnouji Academy a few years ago, though."

Akio blinked several times.

"Aikuro did that?"

"Yeah," Hiroshi responded, eyeing Akio nervously. "Did he not tell you?"

"No... I had no clue."

Aikuro...

He was truly touched. Akio hadn't heard a thing about that, and apparently his brother had been doing it for years. Granted, he was a little pissed that his brother had kept it from him, but he did have Akio's best interest in heart. After all, Akio had never shown any signs of wanting to see his parents in the first place, so why would Aikuro assume otherwise?

"We wanted to reply to them, we really did," Katsumi assured hurriedly. "But he never left a return address."

"That sounds like Aikuro," Akio replied absently, before a thought struck him. "Wait, so you said you decided to come see me after you stopped getting updates? What stopped you from coming before?"

"Well..."

The Takahiros shared a look, both of them shuffling nervously in their seats.

"It's just... well, it sounded like you were happy with your family, so we didn't want to intrude," Hiroshi answered.

"We were scared as well," Katsumi added.

"That doesn't justify any of it," Akio frowned and crossed his arms. "You knew I was here for a few years now. You could have come anytime you wanted to, but you didn't."

"You're right," Hiroshi said apologetically. "Which is why we want to make a change."

"Make a change?"

"That's right. We know we can't just walk back into your life and expect everything to be hunky-dory, but we thought maybe we could become friends? And that maybe you and Akiko could get to know each other better? Ever since she's heard about you, it's all she's talked about."

Akio's angry expression softened. He could feel a very small part of the wall he had put up begin to crumble away.

Maybe he was being too hard on them. Maybe he should just ignore the past. Besides, Akiko shouldn't be deprived of her brother because her parents were cowards and Akio was petty.

"Fine," Akio sighed. He glanced over at Akiko, who was still humming happily as she finished coloring in some unfamiliar Disney princess and moved on to the next page. "So, how old is Akiko now?"

"She turns five at the end of next month," Katsumi smiled, clearly excited in the change in topic.

"Oh, really?"

"Yep," Katsumi nodded enthusiastically, reaching out to squeeze her husband's hand. "You know, it's funny, really. It feels just like

yesterday when we decided we wanted to have a kid, and a few months later, pop, there she was! It's amazing how fast she's grown already."

While her wife seemed oblivious to the words she just said, Hiroshi had realized very quickly just how badly she had worded that sentence.

When the scope of what she had really said washed over her, Katsumi turned to Akio, words already spewing out of her mouth as she tried to correct herself.

"I-I-I, w-what I m-meant-"

"... Decided?"

The damage had already been done. The mixture of hurt and anger on Akio's face was evident enough.

"No, Akio, what I meant to say was-"

"No, no. You're right," Akio scoffed. "You didn't *decide* to have me. I was just an accident, isn't that right?"

"Now, now, Akio," Hiroshi spoke up, hoping to defuse the situation. "It was never our first choice to give you away. It's just... well... we were only seventeen, and still only in high school when we had you."

"No, I understand perfectly," Akio growled. "You both were too scared to step out from underneath mommy and daddy's umbrella, so you took the easy way out and gave me away."

"Please understand, Akio," Katsumi interjected. "Try and put yourselves in our shoes. We were only seventeen, and we were scared. We didn't know what to do. Your grandparents would have kicked all of us out to live on the streets without a second thought. In the end, we did what we thought was best for you and gave you to a family that would actually care for you."

"You did what was best for me, or what was best for you?"

Katsumi swiped at her watery eyes, her resolve beginning to crumble.

"We never wanted to give you away..."

Akiko looked up from her coloring book for the first time, staring at her parents and Akio curiously. She could tell that Akio was a mixture of confused and angry, and that her parents were upset, but she had no clue as to why.

Looking down at her coloring book, she tore out the picture she was working on and handed it over to Akio.

"Here, Akio!" Akiko giggled and wiggled the paper in front of his face.

"Not right now, sweetheart," Katsumi told her daughter and reached for the picture. "We're talking about grown up stuff."

"But, I even used red!" Akiko pouted.

"Oh?"

Akio reached out and grabbed the offered picture, breaking out into a grin when he caught sight of what it was of.

"Scar from the Lion King, huh?"

She had even added on two extra scars to match his own.

"Hmhm," Akiko nodded. "He's a pretty big jerk, but he's the only one with a scar on his face like you."

Akio stared long and hard at the picture in his hand. True to her words, she had indeed colored in nearly all red, except for the eyes, which were green, and the three white scars that ran across his right eye.

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he turned back to his parents.

"So, when's her birthday again?"

"The end of next month," Hiroshi answered slowly, unsure of where he was going with this.

"Give me the address and I'll try and be there."

"Really?"

"Yes," Akio sighed. "Maybe it's for the best if the past stayed in the past."

Hiroshi hurriedly grabbed a napkin and wrote their address on it and handed it over to Akio.

"It's in Osaka, so it'll be a bit of a trip, but we'd love nothing more if you could make it. I wrote our phone numbers on there as well in case you need help finding the place."

Katsumi nodded with her husband's statement, hope once again filling her eyes.

Accepting the napkin, he put both it and the picture in his pocket and checked his phone. He had two messages from Mako, one saying that Ryuko had already beaten Inumuta, and that the fight with Nonon was already underway. Given the fact that her last message was sent more than ten minutes ago, the fight must have already been underway.

"Well, I need to go," Akio said as he stood from his chair. "One of my friends is going through a tough test today and she needs my support."

He turned to his younger sister, unsure if he should shake her hand, give her a hug, or kiss the top of her head. He settled for tousling her hair, letting his hand rest on her head.

"It really was nice meeting you, Akiko. I'll definitely try and be there for your birthday."

Akiko smiled up at Akio, nodding happily.

Akio looked over to his two parents, equally unsure on how to say farewell to them.

"Well," He started awkwardly. "I suppose this is farewell, for now."

"Goodbye, Akio," Hiroshi replied.

"Remember what we said today," Katsumi tagged on. "We'd love it if we could possibly be friends."

"Right..." Akio rubbed the back of his head and began to walk away. "Goodbye, then."

"Bye, Akio!" Akiko called after him, waving enthusiastically.

Akio smiled and waved back, waving until he finally rounded the corner and out of sight.

"Holy crap," He sighed.

That had been an adventure, one he was certainly not expecting on having today. Strangely, he was worried that he might have left them too abruptly, but that seemed silly when he thought about it. He had stuff he had to do, too. They did come on such short notice, after all.

Running a hand through his hair as he walked, Akio tried his best to get his ducks in a row.

First, Ryuko was fighting the Elite Four. Second, his parents had come to see him, wanting to start anew. Third, he had a sister he had never known about until today. Quite the list of things.

The jury was still out on his parents, but Akiko seemed like a very sweet little girl. Maybe it was because they were actually related by

blood, but Akio couldn't help but feel a certain fondness for her. She was very sweet, and surprisingly intelligent for her young age. She was actually quite fun to talk to, too. Honestly, if ended up making it to Osaka, it'd only be so he could see her again.

Maybe that was because she was the only link to his past that Akio actually wanted to maintain.

Akio shook his head. Now wasn't the time to think about this. Ryuko was fighting the fight of her life, and at least for now, Akio's thoughts should be there.

She shouldn't be too far into her fight with Nonon now, so if he hurried, he should-

"Oof!"

Akio rounded a corner, bumping into someone.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

Bending down, he picked up the pink parasol she had dropped and handed it back to her.

"I really do apologize. This is totally my fault."

The girl he bumped into only giggled and tilted her head to the side, resting her parasol back on her shoulder.

Akio blinked at her rather pink outfit, but he tried to ignore it, even if it was ridiculously pink. He also tried to ignore the rather odd purple eye patch that covered up one of her eyes completely. It'd be impolite to stare, after all.

The young woman didn't say anything, and instead brought a hand up to pinch Akio's cheek like a newborn baby before moving past him, humming a merry tune as she skipped along.

Akio rubbed his cheeky dumbly, watching as the unknown girl skipped away.

That had certainly been strange.

Author's Notes:

Well, there ya have it!

I hinted at Akio's parents a few chapters ago, and lo and behold, here they are! And they had a bit of a surprise with them. Akio has a sister!

It really took me a while to write their conversation. I really went back and forth on how Akio would react. Would he be pissed? Would he be indifferent? Would he care?

I settled a little for all three here, so I hope it wasn't too out of character for the usually laid back man. I tried putting myself in his shoes, but since I have never gone through something like that, I did what I thought would be most reasonable.

I do think he'd really have a fondness for Akiko, though, even if she was a sister he had never known about.

Next chapter we'll get to the end of the Nonon fight, and quite possibly when Ryuko goes beast mode!

Thanks for reading guys! I hope you enjoyed it!

Until next time!

Blood Pressure, Part I

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next installment of Before My Body is Dry!

Before we get started, I wanted to give another shout out to a fellow author and pal Knight of Balance! He's been very helpful and fun to talk to, and he's been someone that helped me think up a couple of ideas for my story! In fact, he has his own Kill la Kill story, Kill la Kill: Life Fibers and Death Strings, which is really awesome. Check it out if you get the chance! You won't be disappointed.

And also, a big thank you to Masterelite28, who has literally left a review on every single one of these chapters. Thanks a lot, friend!

Now then, this chapter will be one of two parts. I really, REALLY, wanted to make this into one chapter, but I just couldn't. It'd be pressing ten thousand plus words, so I decided to split it into two so you guys don't have to spend an hour reading it.

I kinda feel bad, since a part of this chapter is a retelling of the Nonon fight, so I apologize if the first part is kinda boring. I started writing at the second half of the fight with Nonon, but it still ended up being super long. And honestly, I really didn't want to rush these scenes, since what's to come is VERY important.

I guarantee you, things heat up after that fight with Nonon finishes. I won't give away much, but I'll tell you one thing, this is where things really begin to snowball out of control for Akio Takahiro. Many things that have happened in these chapters will have repercussions coming up.

Now, on with the show!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

The sounds of instruments and explosions were very audible as Akio made his way back to the arena. Going off of the increasing ferocity of each, Akio guessed that the fight must really be beginning to heat up.

He picked up his pace. Akio didn't want to miss out on any more of the fight than he had to. This was Ryuko's final, and arguably toughest fight yet.

And he'd be lying if he said he didn't want to watch her win.

A few more explosions rocked the arena as he finally made his way to the stairs up the bleachers.

The moment the stage came into view, Akio's jaw dropped to the floor.

High above the now ruined stage, he could clearly see Nonon flying through the air. She was in a gigantic... space ship? That was literally the only word that came to Akio's mind when he first saw it. It was shaped sort of like a giant speaker, except one that could fly with an arsenal of missiles and Nonon in the very center to pilot it.

Was this really her Goku uniform? The sheer ridiculousness of it almost made Akio laugh.

His surprise only increased when he noticed that Ryuko was zipping through the air as well. The leggings of Senketsu had transformed into a thruster, which was pumping out a red flame which allowed Ryuko to fly through the air on par with Nonon's giant space ship.

Akio rubbed his forehead, hardly believing what he was seeing. First of all, this was the last thing he expected when he imagined Nonon's

Goku uniform. Not only that, but this was what, Senketsu's second transformation in less than two hours? That was impressive, if not a little disturbing.

"It's probably fine," Akio told himself. It was her last fight. After this, she was done. Sure, she might be working herself a little too hard, but soon she'd have her answers about her father, and she wouldn't even have to fight Satsuki to do so.

Which was actually pretty weird. He was expecting Satsuki to at least put up a fight. Sure, the Elite Four were formidable, but they were no Satsuki. She was on a whole other level compared to anyone else here. Akio knew he talked a big game a few weeks ago when he confronted her, but when push came to shove, Satsuki could have probably killed him on the spot, and yet, she didn't.

Honestly, Ryuko would be hard-pressed to defeat Satsuki in her current state, and Satsuki knew that as well as he did.

Just what the hell was her end game here? That was an anomaly for another day.

Making his way to Mako, he noticed that they had another guest sitting in their spot.

It seemed that Inumuta had decided to join their little viewing party.

"So, what'd I miss?" Akio asked as he sat down beside Gamagoori, who sitting directly next to Mako, with Uzu and Inumuta on the other side of her.

"Oh, hey Akio!" Mako greeted him as cheerfully as she always did. "Not much. Ryuko stomped Inumuta, and now she's flying around and fighting Jakuzure!"

"She did not 'stomp' me," Inumuta growled as he looked at the laptop in his lap. "I forfeited."

"Because you were losing," Mako countered with a grin before turning back to Akio. "And that's about it so far. How'd meeting up with your parents go?"

"Fine," Akio lied. It had actually been rather confusing, but he had more to worry about. Specifically Ryuko's new ability to fly. "How long as Ryuko been able to fly for?"

"Not too long," Gamagoori answered. "Five or ten minutes."

"Indeed," Inumuta said as he adjusted his glasses. "I've been able to get quite the haul of information from her fights today. Her Kamui has adapted at an exponential rate. Three transformations in three fights. It's hard to believe that a Kamui could have this much power."

Akio blanched.

"... Did you say three?"

"Yes," Inumuta replied and looked up from his laptop, raising an eyebrow at Akio's defeated tone. "Why?"

"How long has this fight been going on for?"

Inumuta looked down at his laptop, pressing a couple of buttons before looking back up at Akio.

"The same length as Gamagoori's fight so far. A little over twenty minutes, and about five minutes longer than my fight."

"Twenty minutes..." Akio breathed.

It had taken her and Senketsu twenty minutes to transform. Twenty minutes. For the third time.

Gamagoori eyed him curiously.

"What are you getting at, Takahiro?"

"He's evolving too fast..." Akio murmured, his eyes following the form of Ryuko as she flew all around.

"He?" Gamagoori blinked. "What, you mean the Kamui?"

Inumuta narrowed his eyes at the No Star.

"You know an awful lot about this Kamui, Takahiro."

"Only as much as the next guy," Akio lied again, recovering from his shock. "It seems obvious that she's overexerting herself, and in turn over exerting the Kamui."

Inumuta scrutinized him for several moments before deeming that answer worthy and turning back to his laptop to do whatever he had been doing beforehand. His eyes occasionally moved up to the fight above him, then back to his keyboard to write down any information he found important.

Since neither Gamagoori or Uzu pressed him for any more information, Akio decided to start paying his full attention to the fight as well. Worrying could only get him so far, after all.

Ryuko had gone for a more direct approach in the fight, and landed directly on the back of Nonon's Goku uniform. Stabbing her scissor blade into the hull of the ship, Ryuko charged towards where Nonon was in the cockpit, her blade tearing through the metal as she ran.

Nonon blew on a whistle, and in response two loudspeakers appeared on the back of her ship, blasting Ryuko away with the heavy base that played through the speakers. The loudspeaker also fired off several of music symbols at Ryuko, which seemed pretty strange given the fact that it was a loudspeaker, but it wouldn't be the weirdest thing that Akio's seen so far today.

Ryuko flipped through the air, twirling around for several moments before recovering and hovering in place in the air.

Grinning madly, Ryuko tilted her chest forwards, letting her thrusters send her flying not towards Nonon, but towards Satsuki.

"You idiot!" Akio hissed. Like a weak attack like that would work. He wished he could smack some sense into her himself, but it looked like he'd have to resort to being the peanut gallery for now.

As expected, Nonon intercepted her, knocking her far and away from her precious queen. Ryuko slammed into the rock surface of the broken-up stage, bouncing several feet before coming to a stop.

With her back on the ground, Ryuko activated Senketsu's thrusters, skidding away just before Nonon slammed directly into the ground where Ryuko once was.

From this distance, it was finally possible to hear the two shout at each other.

"How dare you try and get in-between me and Satsuki!" Nonon shouted at Ryuko as she followed her around. "Bitch! You're way out of your league!"

Ryuko flew further and further away, trying to create distance between the two.

"To hell with your opinion!" Ryuko retorted. "I'll take my own path no matter what anyone else says!"

"You're a sour note alright! I'm going to erase you!" Nonon screeched. "Have a taste of this! Symphony Regalia, Musical Barrage!"

The speakers on Nonon's uniform boomed and several purple bursts of light erupted from them, barreling directly at the flying Ryuko.

Ryuko dodged the first barrage, but Nonon was relentless with her assault. Upping the ante, she fired a salvo of recorder-shaped missiles at Ryuko.

The first missile hit, enveloping Ryuko in an inferno as several other missiles struck true.

Or so it seemed.

Ryuko flew out of the ball of fire with one of Nonon's missiles in her hands and prepped to throw.

With a grunt, Ryuko chucked the gigantic missile directly at Nonon.

Nonon watched dumbly as the missile slowly fell down upon her, a single eye twitching at the sight.

The second the missile struck home, Nonon's uniform exploded into a gigantic fireball. A river of musical instruments poured out of the inferno, overflowing the ruined stage and spilling over the side.

Akio rose an eyebrow at that, but he assumed that her Goku uniform's transformation must have been made out of orchestra instruments, or something. It was simply the only thing that made any sense.

"AIEEE!"

Mako began squealing and screeching at the turn of events, running and jumping all around as she tried to avoid the rain of musical instruments.

Tripping over a trumpet, she fell face first towards Inumuta, her head bumping his laptop.

"STOP THAT!" Inumuta screamed in Mako's face before he settled down into a murderous expression. "If anything happens to my laptop, you die."

Mako cried in terror and bolted towards Akio, climbing up on his back to hide from the wrath of Inumuta.

"You wouldn't let him do that, right buddy?"

"Of course not," Akio affirmed absently, his eyes still on the fight.

Mako sighed in relief and slowly climbed off Akio and sat back down in her own seat.

Ryuko's attack didn't finish off Nonon completely. Rising from the rubble, Nonon slowly stood, rubbing her head gingerly and wiping off some of the dirt and grime from the explosion.

Ryuko laughed and smacked her in the back of the head with her scissor blade as she flew back around, then flew in front of Nonon to taunt her some more.

"Hey, what's up with your performance?" Ryuko laughed, resting her blade on the back of her shoulders. "Can't you fly anymore?"

Her grin turning feral, Ryuko brandished her scissor blade as she slowly crept towards the downed Nonon.

"Because if you can't, that's going to be awfully inconvenient for you!"

Ryuko attacked Nonon, knocking her in the air as she zipped by, then immediately turning around and hitting her again before she could hit the ground completely. Ryuko didn't let up in her assault as she knocked Nonon every which way across the arena.

"Your butt is ours now! She's all yours, Senketsu!"

"Wait, wait, wait just a second!" Nonon cried, holding her hands up to ward off Ryuko. "If I can't fly anymore, isn't the cliché that you come down to challenge me?"

Ryuko only laughed and came around for another bombing run.

"You gotta go all the way when you win or else it'll come back to bite you!"

Akio sighed in relief. Honestly, he was expecting her to take that bait.

"Finishing move: Sen-i-Soshitsu!"

Ryuko flew by Nonon, her blade seemingly cutting threw her as she passed. Nonon shrieked in terror and pain as she was flung across the stage and over the side.

"Yay!" Mako cheered and jumped out of her seat, hopping up and down in place as she fist pumped the air. "Ryuko won, Ryuko won!"

"Damn it," Akio cursed.

Mako stopped celebrating and turned to him.

"Why aren't you cheering as well, Akio? She won!"

"No, she didn't," Akio sighed. "Whenever she uses that move it severs the Life Fiber from the Goku uniform and Senketsu absorbs it. I haven't seen any floating red pieces of string yet."

"She should not have underestimated Nonon Jakuzure!" Gamagoori boomed. "Us Elite Four won't go down that easily!"

As if on cue, all of the students in the stands began clapping their hands together and chanting for an encore.

"Encore!"

"Encore!"

"Encore!"

"Oh," Akio groaned and rubbed his head. "This isn't good."

"Encore!" Mako cheered, following along.

"Mako!" Akio hissed, bopping her on the head with his knuckles. "They're cheering for Nonon!"

Bright pink and purple lights shone down from above, illuminating the stage opposite of Ryuko. A mechanic platform rose in the circle of light, with none other than Nonon Jakuzure on top of it.

"Three Star Goku uniform, Symphony Regalia Da Capo!"

Her outfit had changed quite a bit from the one she had on moments before. While the first one had a design that almost resembled that of a skeleton, this one was much different, and looked a lot like one of those outfits you'd see an orchestra conductor wear.

Nonon flicked her hair back over her shoulder, smiling smugly as she watched Ryuko.

"For our encore, let's go with one of the standards!"

Mako sat forward in her seat, her eyes sparkling as she looked on at Nonon and Ryuko.

"There's more?!"

"What you are about to witness is the true power of a Three Star Goku uniform!" Gamagoori bellowed.

"Jakuzure never did know when to end a performance," Inumuta added glibly. "They really drag out after the encore."

The platform Nonon stood on slowly disappeared into the ground, leaving the Three Star on an equal footing as Ryuko.

"For my finale," Nonon began, pointing her baton at Ryuko. "A tune known to children everywhere! Beethoven's Symphony No. 5: 'Fate'!"

What appeared to be a mini-cannon grew out of Nonon's hat, firing a giant purple stream at Ryuko as the familiar Beethoven song began to play.

Ryuko reflexively bent backwards, avoiding the stream of pure sound.

"Gah, the sound on that thing!"

"I'm just getting warmed up!"

The stream intensified as Nonon got more heated, bringing Ryuko to her knees. She tried to stand, but it seemed that her body had other ideas, as it stayed where it was on the ground.

"I see you're confused, transfer student," Nonon chuckled. "The rhythm blasted out by my Goku uniform resonates with the targeted Life Fibers, manipulates them, and inflicts damage. That is the power of my Symphony Regalia Da Capo!"

Ryuko growled and tried to stand despite Nonon's words, but it was no use. Nonon's Goku uniform was working just as she wanted. Ryuko and Senketsu could hardly move.

"You've been reduced to a wooden doll that can only sit there and bear the brunt of my baton's attacks!"

The stage could hardly withstand Nonon's attack, either. Several bits and pieces of the concrete began to break away and fall towards the ground below. Soon, Ryuko would have nothing left to stand on.

The stream of energy emitted from Nonon's hat increased in intensity, enveloping Ryuko and Senketsu in its purple light.

Akio ground his teeth as he fidgeted in his seat. The air on the back of his neck had stood up on end, and he could feel goose bumps spread across his body.

His eyes drifted from Ryuko to the bleachers all around her and to the skies above.

Something felt wrong. Very wrong. It wasn't that Ryuko had the tables tipped on her; no, it was something very different. Something oppressive. It felt like something heavy was weighing down on chest.

Akio couldn't pinpoint why he felt this way, but he knew something was definitely wrong. His instincts were telling him to stand up and run away. It felt like someone was breathing down his neck, but he knew that was crazy, since no one was sitting behind him.

Just what the hell was this?

Akio shook his head and took a deep breath. Maybe it was just him being on edge. Given the day he had, it wouldn't be that much of a stretch.

There were more important things to worry about than some feeling he might be having.

The stream of energy from Nonon's hat began to dwindle down, soon evaporating into nothing. A cloud of smoke clouded the arena, but that too soon drifted away, revealing the destroyed ground caused by Nonon's attack and the downed Ryuko at the other side of the stage.

"Everybody around here keeps running off at the mouth," Ryuko grunted as she stood. "Shut out all the extraneous noise, Senketsu."

It seemed that Senketsu had objected to her statement, since Ryuko strapped her scissor blade to one of the straps that ran down her back.

Making an 'x' with her arms, Ryuko placed them front of her face, closing her eyes to concentrate as she presumably prepared to ward off Nonon's next attack.

"And now, it's time for the encore to come to an end!" Nonon announced. The cannon on her head began to glow a bright purple as electricity began to crackle around it. "Here's your finale! Your 'fate' ends here!"

Another purple blast of energy burst from Nonon's head, barreling across the stage at directly towards Ryuko.

The sheer force of the blast caused Nonon to scoot backwards, but Ryuko still stood firm in her spot.

The blast hit her straight on, resulting in a giant flash of bright light that nearly blinded everyone in the stands. But, after a few moments, the light dimmed, showing several different streams of purple light traveling across the sky and away from Ryuko.

"Did she block them?" Akio gasped.

As the scene on the arena became more and more clear, Akio's first assumption had proved correct. Ryuko still stood tall, her arms crossed out in front of her and deflecting the blast from Nonon.

"My music isn't ringing out?!" Nonon exclaimed.

"It's not that it isn't ringing out," Inumuta said, his eyes widening as they examined the information on his laptop.

"Whatwhatwhat?"

"What is it?"

Both Mako and Gamagoori leaned over to peek at Inumuta's laptop, while Akio and Uzu stayed put in their seats, only glancing over at the trio.

"Matoi is taking the rhythm emanated by Jakuzure and using that technique to make it resonate and turning it into a pure tone."

"Pure tone?" Akio asked, raising an eyebrow.

"She's altering the frequency of the waves Jakuzure is giving off to match her own," Inumuta explained. "Although the sound is muddy on impact, it eventually matches her own natural frequency. Just like a tuning fork. "

"No way..."

"So, what you're saying is that Ryuko is awesome!" Mako burst in.

"Mankanshoku has boiled down your complicated information to its essence," Gamagoori concurred, albeit slightly. "This is what you mean by pure tone?"

"This is what I mean by pure stupidity," Inumuta grumbled.

Akio tuned back into the fight, where Ryuko and Nonon were still locked in a stalemate. Nonon kept up her assault, while Ryuko kept up her sturdy defense.

"Impossible!" Nonon cried. "My attack isn't working?"

Inumuta gasped as another flood of information appeared on his screen.

"No, it's much worse than that..."

Finally giving in, Akio looked at Inumuta's laptop, curious as to what he was talking about.

"What do you-"

"Senketsu Mubyoshi!"

Akio's head snapped back to the fight below, where Ryuko had finally went on the counterattack. The small bubble that had drove off Nonon's sound had begun to expand, slowly pushing back Nonon's purple beam.

The two pushed hard against each other, neither side wavering.

"She's trying to drive me back? Over my dead body!"

Nonon's purple stream began to push against the black, sound proof bubble that was protecting Ryuko, slowly pushing it back towards her.

"What's that? I can't hear a single note you're playing!"

Ryuko's soundproof bubble pushed back against Nonon's beam, pushing it back rapidly towards its sender.

"Y-you stinking, stinking, stinking, bitch!" Nonon screeched, refusing to give in.

Even though, in the end, Ryuko proved to be stronger.

Letting out a war cry, Ryuko channeled all of her power into her bubble, completely sending Nonon's attack back at her.

Nonon let out a cry of pain and anguish as the blast overtook her.

"The frequencies emitted by the Kamui, which is one hundred percent Life Fibers, are far more powerful than Jakuzure's Goku uniform!" Inumuta shouted over the noisy fight, the words leaving his mouth quicker than his lips could move. "Her sound is being negated!"

With Nonon paralyzed, Ryuko finally went on the offensive.

Taking out her scissor blade, she charged forwards, allowing the blade to reach its full length.

But, something was wrong. The feeling Akio had felt earlier had increased tenfold. He wasn't the only one to notice it, either.

"What is this I'm sensing..." Uzu mumbled, his head turning every which way to try and get a lock on it.

Akio turned his head up to the sky, where he could faintly see a figure drifting down to stage below.

"Wait, who is that?!"

Inumuta, Gamagoori, and Mako all turned their heads up to the sky, looking to where Akio was pointing.

The figure was dressed in a pink, strapless dress, with a pink bow in her hair to match. Her left eye was covered in a purple eye patch, one that Akio was all too familiar with. She was falling towards the stage, but the parasol she held in her hands slowed her decent.

"Let's do it! Scissor blade: Decapitation Mode!"

Ryuko continued with her attack, completely unaware to the young girl descending upon her.

"It's curtains for you!"

Ryuko swung her blade through Nonon as she passed by her.

"Finishing move: Sen-i-Soshitsu!"

Nonon flipped upwards, her uniform exploding into hundreds of cloth fragments.

As Ryuko skidded to a halt, the single red Life Fiber drifted away from Nonon's body, slowly making its way to Ryuko where it was sucked up by Senketsu.

She was still completely oblivious to the girl who had dropped right behind her.

Akio knew she was trouble. When he had bumped into her in public, he thought nothing of it, but what type of girl intervenes in a fight such as this? One where one of the combatants has a Kamui?

The surprised look on Satsuki's usually stern face was all the evidence Akio needed to confirm his suspicions.

"Wow, that was impressive!" The unknown girl exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "That Kamui you have sure is something!"

Ryuko flinched, spinning around on her heel to face the unknown entity.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Matoi, get back!"

Everyone's heads turned up to where Satsuki was standing on her tower.

"Lady Satsuki has lost her cool?" Gamagoori murmured, perplexed as everyone else was by the situation.

"I don't like this," Akio said, turning to Inumuta. "Inumuta, see if you can't find anything about this unknown girl."

"On it."

Not seeing this unknown guest as a threat, Ryuko completely desynchronized. She ignored Satsuki's warning, taking a step towards the pink girl.

"So, who the hell are you?"

Still, the girl ignored Ryuko, only paying attention to Satsuki up on her perch. Ryuko was growing more and more agitated at being ignored by the second, but she didn't do anything about it.

"Why have you come here, Nui Harime?" Satsuki asked the girl.

Akio raised an eyebrow and turned to the three Elite Four members beside him.

"Does that name ring a bell to any of you?"

All three shook their heads, all of them still as confused as he was.

Nui giggled and leaned forwards, smiling sweetly at Satsuki.

"This isn't fair, Lady Satsuki, doing something this fun without telling me!"

"I'm not obligated to tell you anything," Satsuki retorted.

"Gosh, how cold! I thought you and I were two hearts beating as one! Both day and night!"

"Don't be insincere. You associate with no one."

"You're as breathtaking as ever!" Nui giggled once more, undeterred by Satsuki's hostile nature. "Your icy stare and icy skin are simply too much! My fingers are tingling!"

The childish smile never leaving her face, Nui turned around and addressed Ryuko for the very first time.

"Now, I know Lady Satsuki told you you'd win after defeating three of her Elite Four, but I'm afraid you'll have to have one more fight."

"One more fight?"

"That's right," Nui nodded. "After all, it wouldn't be right if you had to fight the Elite Four without going through four fights. So I'll be your opponent!"

"I don't think so," Ryuko scoffed. "I won my answers fair and square. I don't have to do shit."

Akio sighed in relief. At least Ryuko was keeping a somewhat level head about this.

"Inumuta, did you find anything about Nui Harime?"

He didn't answer. His eyes were narrowed as he looked at the screen in front of him.

"Inumuta?"

Inumuta sighed and rubbed the back of his eyelids.

"... Her identity is unknown. Even with her name, I can't find anything."

"What?" Akio exclaimed. "How can that be possible? There has to be *something* ."

"Nope," Inumuta shook his head. "No fingerprints, no birth certificate, no social security number, absolutely nothing."

"How could that be possible..."

In this day and age, there was no possible way to be off the radar like this. If you were born into this world, there had to be something on file out there. It was impossible to be so off the radar like this.

Nui giggled and skipped over to Ryuko.

"Your answers?" Nui asked and leaned into her personal space, making Ryuko lean back unless they were to butt heads. "Oh, I know all about those, silly! Even more than Lady Satsuki!"

Ryuko blinked.

"What?"

"That's right!"

Nui hopped back, placing her hands on her hips.

"In fact, I have proof right here!"

Reaching into dress, she slowly began to pull a sword out of her bra.

But, it wasn't just any sword. It was a purple scissor blade.

Twirling the blade elegantly around her body, Nui brought the blade up and pointed it at Ryuko.

"Ta-dah! See? I know all about your father, Ryuko!"

Ryuko's eyes were immediately drawn to the blade. Her face was completely blank out of shock, but her eyes were a storm of emotion.

"That's... that's..."

"Yep, the other half of your scissor blade! I pulled this out of your dad!"

"Wait... It was you?"

"Yep, it was me!" Nui replied cheerfully. "I was the one who killed your father!"

Akio's eyes widened in terror, the color draining from his face the moment he saw the blade. Things were about to take a very sharp turn for the worst.

Ryuko's bangs fell in front of her face and completely covered her eyes. Her hands were down at her sides, clenched into fists. Drops of blood dripped from her palms as her fingernails dug into her skin. Blood seeped from her mouth as well as her teeth bit into her bottom lip.

Even from this distance, Akio could see her whole body trembling.

Rage had all but taken her.

"You..."

This wasn't Ryuko anymore. No, the girl standing down there on the stage was anything but the girl Akio had come to know these past few months. All of her pent up anger and sadness from the past years of searching for her father had been released with eight words.

' I was the one who killed your father!'

The pin in her glove popped out without her even pulling it.

Ryuko slowly lifted her head, her eyes clenched shut and her teeth threatening to break as they ground into each other.

"BITCH!"

Her mind was lost. Her sanity gone.

Ryuko disappeared in a burst of bright light as Senketsu activated once more.

That was all Akio needed to spring into action. No more sitting around. He had to act.

"Sanageyama and Gamagoori, I need you to go find Jakuzure and start evacuating the stadium, immediately. Sanageyama and Jakuzure will lead the students out as Gamagoori clears any wreckage from the previous fights. Inumuta, I need you to use your laptop to log into Honnouji Academy's interface and make it so that all of the trams and buses are coming directly towards the school so that the students will be able to leave."

All three of the Elite Four crossed their arms and stared indignantly at Akio. Out of all of the people at the Academy, they were the last to be ordered around by some No Star.

"And why would we listen to you?" Uzu scoffed.

"We only take orders from Lady Satsuki," Gamagoori barked.

"Not some No Star," Inumuta added.

Akio stood and turned to face them, not deterred in the slightest by their rebuttal or their rank. If anything, he was dumbstruck by their lack of intelligence and insight. He really didn't have the time to explain to this to them, either.

"Are you three stupid?!" Akio shouted and pointed down to the stage below, where Ryuko had already charged Nui and was attacking her recklessly. "That's Isshin Matoi's killer down there, in case you hadn't

noticed! And I'll tell you, Ryuko isn't going to give two SHITS about anything else except for making sure that Nui Harime is nothing but a carcass on the ground. The past year has been dedicated to nothing else but bringing down this mysterious murderer, and I guarantee you that she'd tear this whole place to the ground if it meant that Nui Harime was dead in the ground. Now, you tell me, do you care more about taking orders from me, or would you rather make sure no innocent students died as this stadium you built gets destroyed?! Because if you want me to, I can tell the whole world, including your precious Satsuki, that you three had too much damn pride to listen to the obvious facts as innocent people died! In fact, I'd be happy to!"

The three Elite Four were slightly surprised by the usually reserved man's outburst, but they certainly didn't show it.

They all shared a look and nodded. While they didn't like taking orders from someone beneath them, Akio had made a good point. As Elite Four, it was their job to make sure the students that they helped govern didn't perish in this conflict, and it seemed that Akio had a decent enough plan on how to go about protecting them.

"Alright," Gamagoori conceded and stood. "We'll do as you say. As Elite Four, it is our duty to protect the students."

"Thank you," Akio exhaled. To be honest, he was unsure if they would listen or not, but he was definitely grateful that they did. "Get to it, then. Time is of the essence."

Gamagoori and Uzu nodded, both running off to do as Akio ordered.

Akio glanced at Mako, hoping that she'd leave with the rest of the students, but he knew she wouldn't, so it'd be pointless to try. If he was Mako, he wouldn't leave either.

"Alright, Inumuta," Akio began as he sat back down in his seat. "When you finish with that, there's something else I could use your help with."

"Understood," Inumuta replied as he typed away on his laptop. After pressing at a few keys, he turned to Akio. "All modes of transportation have been redirected to the Academy."

"Good. Now I need you to get a track on Ryuko's vitals."

Inumuta nodded and went back to work, his fingers dancing around his laptop's keyboard as he typed.

Akio turned his attention back to the fight below. Ryuko had attacked Nui without a second thought, swinging her blade relentlessly at the pink girl. Surprisingly enough, Nui had blocked every single one of Ryuko's strikes without even trying. The only part of her body that moved was the arm that was carrying the purple scissor blade.

And yet, that wasn't even the thing that surprised Akio the most. It was the fact that every one of Ryuko's attacks were swung with the intent to kill, and nothing else. They were all aimed at the vital points of Nui, and would have killed the girl if she hadn't blocked every single strike effortlessly.

"Ryuko..." Mako whimpered, biting her fingernails. Mako may have played the lovable fool sometimes, but she wasn't dense. She knew that things were bad.

Nui ducked as Ryuko swung at her neck, slipping behind her as she placed her hand on Ryuko's shoulder.

Senketsu's eye bulged and twitched as Nui's hand ran over his cloth. To get away from her he flung himself across the stage, taking Ryuko with him.

"I've got her vitals pulled up," Inumuta spoke up.

"And?"

"Her heart rate is one hundred and seventy, her blood pressure is one sixty-nine over one hundred, and her temperature is one

hundred and three point three."

"What?!"

"Yes," Inumuta replied and pushed up his glasses. "Her whole body is heating up."

Damn it!

It was nearly identical to the vitals that Kinue Kinagase had before the prototype Kamui killed her.

"Look, it's one of those red threads!"

Akio snapped his head to big television screen upon hearing Mako's cry.

There, attached to Nui's pinky finger, was a single red thread that was still connected to Senketsu.

"That's..." Akio trailed off.

"A banshi..." Inumuta finished, equally as surprised as Akio.

Banshis were the Life Fibers essential to creating any type of Life Fiber imbued clothing. Basically, they were what tied the entire outfit together, and gave it its powers. If someone were to sever it from the article of clothing, it would be destroyed instantly. Banshis were impossible to spot within the fabric of a uniform to be safe, so the fact that Nui could pick it out from Senketsu was unimaginable.

Nui tugged hard on the string, severing it from Senketsu completely.

Steam immediately began blowing out of Senketsu's body, while the eye on Ryuko's chest plate began to twitch violently and bulge outwards. Senketsu's pupil became more and more dilated, and just when Akio thought everything was ruined, he stopped and recovered himself. Dr. Matoi's handiwork wouldn't be undone by taking out a single thread.

Ryuko yelled and charged at Nui again, swinging her sword downwards.

Nui dodged it, but the strike still caused the ground she had once been standing on to explode.

Ryuko spun on her heel, swinging again at Nui, but the girl blocked it easily.

The two pushed against each other, neither backing down.

And then, Akio heard Nui utter the words that would change the fight completely.

"Do you really think you can avenge your father like this? Nope, nope, nope!"

More steam emitted from Senketsu, enveloping Ryuko.

"Matoi's heart rate has spiked to two hundred, and her systolic blood pressure has risen to one hundred and eighty!"

"THAT'S THE LAST STRAW!"

The steam from Senketsu began to form a whirlwind around Ryuko, and then, it stopped all at once and got sucked back into Senketsu.

Everything was still for a second, and then, what Akio had feared since the very first day he had met Ryuko, happened.

Streams of blood began to spill out of Senketsu, and within seconds, Ryuko exploded into a pool of red as all of the blood Senketsu had sucked out had been released all at once.

Blood went everywhere. There was so much of it that it had even begun raining down on the arena, even reaching Akio in the stands.

He was repulsed by the drops of the red liquid smacking against his skin, but he couldn't take his eyes off of the scene below.

Senketsu was no longer the sailor uniform he had once been. He had transformed into a giant, demonic face with razor sharp teeth, and without a second thought swallowed Ryuko whole.

Once the downpour of blood began to clear, Ryuko became visible once again. Or, what was left of Ryuko.

It had happened. The Kamui that Dr. Matoi had created had swallowed Ryuko whole.

She had grown in size by at least three feet, and her skin had turned to a sickly green. Her left arm had inflated to at least three times its original size, while her right arm had simply melded with her scissor blade. The skirt she had once worn was gone, replaced by a skirt made of teeth.

But, the most striking change was her face. Her eyes had gone completely white and bloodshot. Her mouth was trapped shut, but that was only because her teeth had turned into fangs, and two of them had pierced through the top of her jaw and out the top of her head. Speaking of which, her head wasn't even attached to her chest anymore. Instead, it was attached to her shoulder where Senketsu's eye was.

"Ryuko's gone," Akio whispered, still not believe what he was seeing.

"What?!" Mako exclaimed. "What do you mean?!"

"She's been swallowed completely by Senketsu," Akio replied, his jaw tightening. "She has no control of herself anymore."

As if to punctuate Akio's point, Ryuko jumped towards Nui, slamming her fist downwards towards her.

She dodged it easily, but the attack singlehandedly destroyed the rest of the stage.

"Matoi's body can't handle this for long," Inumuta chimed in. "She'll die of blood loss in a few minutes."

"Damn it," Akio cursed and stood up from his seat. "Come on, Inumuta. We need to go find Satsuki."

Inumuta nodded and closed his laptop, standing as well.

Akio pulled Mako up by her hand and placed his other hand on her shoulder.

"Mako, I won't tell you to leave, since I know you won't, but please be careful, alright? For me?"

Mako nodded, her lips set in a firm line. Her face seemed a little shaky, and even somewhat afraid, but her eyes screamed of determination.

Before Akio could say anything else, Mako bolted down the bleachers, screaming at the top of her lungs while she ran.

"Stop dying from the blood loss, Ryuko! Stop the blood stealing!"

Inumuta stared dumbly after Mako.

"You sure have an interesting group of friends, Takahiro."

"Shut it," Akio growled and began walking. "We need to get to Satsuki. Now."

Author's Notes:

So, there you have it!

Like I said, I really wanted to finish this in one go, but it just didn't work out that way, and I didn't want to detract from the important scenes by having this chapter drag out for too long.

Next chapter we'll get to the fight with the beast Ryuko! Just how will Akio and Satsuki solve this problem? Will they be able to save Ryuko? Or will Aikuro be forced to unleash the S.A.B.?

Hopefully part two will be posted in the next couple of days. I'm really looking forward to writing the next part, so it shouldn't take too long.

Well, thanks for reading guys! I hope you all had a great 4th, and I'll see you next time!

Blood Pressure, Part II

Hey guys! Welcome to the next installment of Before My Body is Dry!

And boy oh boy, do we got a big chapter on our hands here. Probably the most important one of the story thus far. A lot of shit goes down, and you know, I think everyone learns a little something about themselves in the end. Isn't that sweet.

I'm very, very excited to post this one. I'm really looking forward to seeing what you guys all think of it!

I'll give you all a little teaser before we start. Akio definitely gets his hands dirty!

Well then, let's get on with it!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

The animalistic roars coming from Ryuko rang out through the stadium as Akio and Inumuta walked down the bleachers towards the ground below.

Each roar made Akio flinch, reminding him of his failure. It seemed like years now, but Akio very clearly remembered the oath he had made.

When he had first received that letter from Dr. Matoi weeks after his death, Akio had sworn to him that he would keep Ryuko safe from just this type of thing. Isshin Matoi might have never been able to hear that promise, but it didn't matter. In his honor, Akio would watch over his daughter.

It didn't stay that way for long, however. As time went by, Akio found that he wasn't worried about Ryuko for her father anymore. It was

because of Ryuko herself. Deep down, a part of Akio just didn't want to see Ryuko get hurt. Of course, that was irrational, and even somewhat stupid, but the feeling had persisted no matter what Akio had told himself. The same held true for Mako and Aikuro, but it was different. He didn't really know why.

Akio whipped out his phone as he walked and brought up Aikuro in his contacts.

I'm going to engage Ryuko. Remember what I told you, and make sure to stay safe. See you soon, brother.

Akio typed the message out and pressed send. He knew Aikuro was somewhere with a high vantage point, no doubt watching all of this play out through the scope of a rifle.

He just hoped his trigger finger wasn't twitching today.

"So, where is Lady Satsuki?

"There."

Looking to where Inumuta was pointing, Akio saw Satsuki descend a long flight of stairs that had appeared in front of the tower she had once been on.

"Alright, let's hurry."

The two began to jog towards Satsuki, making it to her just as the rest of the Elite Four arrived.

Satsuki raised an eyebrow ever so slightly at Akio's presence among the Elite Four, but if she objected, she didn't say anything.

The president continued walking, each of the Elite Four falling into step with her. After a few seconds Akio tagged along as well, but he wasn't exactly cherishing this moment.

"Lady Satsuki, are you alright?"

"The destruction of this stadium can no longer be prevented," Satsuki spoke calmly, not answering Gamagoori's question. "I want you four to evacuate the students."

The Elite Four all shared a look considering this had already been done, before Akio spoke up for them.

"Already done. All trams and buses have been routed to the school to pick them up, as well. All students should be at a safe distance by now. Were there any casualties?"

"None," Uzu replied. "Other than a few bruises, and in one case a broken arm, all of the students left safely."

Satsuki stopped walking and turned to Akio, her face blank.

"The order has already been given," Akio continued, sarcasm beginning to ooze into his voice. "I hope I didn't step on any toes."

Satsuki looked to Elite Four for confirmation.

"Is this true?"

Gamagoori nodded.

"Indeed. Once Matoi lost control, Takahiro gave the orders to evacuate. All students are off the premises."

Akio stared intently at Satsuki, not allowing himself to show any emotion. He was more than glad that all of the students had vacated the area safely, but a small part of him wanted Satsuki to know that it was *him* that saved her students, not her. That it was *him* that sprung into action while Satsuki sat and drank tea. As petty as that might be, a small, small part of him wished this.

Satsuki blinked a few times, but other than that she showed no obvious reaction.

"Good work," Satsuki replied and continued her walk towards the center of the destroyed stadium.

"Enough of this," Akio said and stepped in front of Satsuki, cutting her off. "I need to know what you're planning to do about Ryuko."

"Takahiro!" Gamagoori barked. "How dare you-"

Satsuki rose a hand up to stop Gamagoori, then turned to address Akio.

"I will stop her."

"No, that won't work."

Nonon growled and stepped towards Akio, poking him hard in the chest.

"Watch who you're talking to! No piece of trash like you gets to order Lady Satsuki around!"

Nonon jabbed Akio a full more times before Akio got fed up with it snatched Nonon's hand out of the air and threw it back to her.

"I'm talking to Kiryuin, not you *lackey* ."

Nonon gasped, her surprise at being talked back to quickly turning into pure, unadulterated anger.

"Who are you calling lackey, you no good piece of-"

"Enough!" Satsuki bellowed, glaring sharply at Akio. "I have no time for this. Get on with it or get out of my way."

"Fine. I have a plan."

"Oh?" Satsuki rose an eyebrow. "Out with it."

"I need a distraction so I can get to her back."

"Her back?" Inumuta questioned.

"Yes," Akio nodded, still watching Satsuki. "If you can get Ryuko into a position where her back is exposed, I can subdue her."

Satsuki was intrigued with his confidence, but she wasn't exactly sold.

"How?"

"I have a few ideas in mind, and I'll need the help of your Elite Four," Akio replied slowly. "But, I assure you, I can bring her down without harming her or Senketsu."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself."

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

"And why should we listen to you?" Nonon growled, clearly still annoyed with Akio's lackey comment. "We're not exactly the closest of allies, you know."

"Simple. If I succeed, no harm done. If I fail, I'll probably die, and then Kiryuin can go on with her original plan of using force."

"You're willing to bet your life on this?" Satsuki asked him.

"Yes," Akio answered resolutely, leaving no room for discussion.

Satsuki scrutinized Akio for several antagonizing moments before conceding with a nod.

"So be it."

Slapping down the bracer on her thigh, Satsuki readied herself for battle.

"Life Fiber Override, Kamui Junketsu!"

In a flash of light, her Kamui activated, and her outfit changed into one similar to Senketsu, but with very large spikes on her shoulder where the Kamui's eyes were. Even with a different person, the transformation into an activated Kamui was incredible to see. While Ryuko and Senketsu's transformation was more natural and unbidden, Satsuki and Junketsu were more reserved, and almost controlling in their relationship with each other.

Her grip tightening around her sword, she addressed the Elite Four and Akio one last time.

"We'll divert to Takahrio's judgment in this matter. Do as he says."

With that, Satsuki jumped away and towards Ryuko to confront her head on.

"Alright, let's make it quick," Akio began. "Inumuta, I need you to make sure that there are no students left on campus. Use the cameras for a better view and any other technology you can use to make sure there are no stragglers. Once your done with that get a track on Ryuko's vitals. Death by blood loss is very possible at this point."

Inumuta nodded and opened his laptop, doing as Akio told him.

"Jakazure, I need you to make sure no one interferes with our engagement with Ryuko. I don't want any unnecessary casualties."

Nonon rose an eyebrow at that.

"Who would be dumb enough to get in the middle of this?"

"Believe me, someone will."

Nonon shrugged, but nodded nonetheless.

"Sanageyama, I want you to sit on the sidelines and watch closely, ready to intervene at the drop of hat. If Kiryuin is in danger, jump in to help her out."

Akio bit his cheek at that, but in good conscience, he couldn't allow Satsuki to die to the hands of some demonic Ryuko. Not after she agreed to help him.

"I doubt she'll need it," Akio continued. "But, it's better safe than sorry."

Uzu nodded and grabbed his shinai off of his back as he popped his neck and his knuckles.

"And now, Gamagoori."

Akio turned to the giant of a man, looking up at him with a confident grin on his face.

"How good is your throwing arm?"

Akio, Nonon, and Gamagoori made their way off to the side of the stadium in silence as the battle waged around them.

Ryuko was still mercilessly attacking Nui, but Nui had dodged every attack. It seemed that Satsuki was waiting until the two finished up, presumably to see if Nui would perish in the conflict. The two seemed to have some sort of past, but as to what, Akio didn't know. He couldn't blame her, either. Nui Harime rubbed him entirely the wrong way.

"Are you sure about this, Takahiro?"

"Yes, Gamagoori. I am sure. Trust me, this will work."

"This seems incredibly stupid to me, but Lady Satsuki told me to follow your orders, so follow them I will."

"If we're lucky, maybe he'll die," Nonon grumbled, kicking a stray rock as she walked.

Akio ignored it, his eyes glued on to the fight in front of him.

Ryuko continued to attack Nui relentlessly as Nui continued to antagonize her.

Suddenly, Ryuko stopped completely in her tracks.

Twisting her neck in a way that should be impossible, the beast looked behind her.

Tsumugu Kinagase stood tall, his two pistols in his hand loaded and ready to go.

"Oh, damn it!" Nonon cursed and stepped forwards. "How did that idiot get in here?!"

Akio held his arm out to stop her.

"Don't."

Nonon turned to him, glaring daggers at the brown haired No Star. She still was keen on the idea of being ordered by someone so beneath her.

"Excuse me?"

"Let him be. He won't get himself killed, nor will he do any harm. And if we're lucky, he'll prove to be a worthy distraction."

"Distraction?" Nonon chuckled and shook her head. "I think I'm starting to warm up to you already, you piece of trash."

Akio ignored her comment, his eyes still glued to Ryuko.

He had to give it to Tsumugu. He had balls.

Tsumugu fired at both Ryuko and Nui with his two weapons, before bringing both of his guns onto Ryuko alone.

Ryuko didn't budge an inch, not even flinching as the hundreds of needles struck her.

Letting a predatory growl, Ryuko pounced forwards, swinging her blade at Tsumugu.

Tsumugu ducked and slid underneath it, but all he was able to do was avoid one of the monsters.

Nui's purple scissor blade was stabbed into the ground right where he was sliding to. Tsumugu had stopped sliding before he reached the blade, but it was still dangerously close to his private area.

Scrambling to his feet and hopping away, Tsumugu fled the battle field, but not before Nui followed after him.

"Perfect."

Now they didn't have to worry about the unpredictable Nui getting in their way. All that was left was Ryuko herself!

Feeling his phone vibrate in his pocket, Akio pulled it out and opened the new message he received.

I sent you a little help. Good luck out there.

"Change of plan," Akio said and put his phone away. "The minute the opportunity presents itself, we're commencing with my plan."

Gamagoori nodded, rotating his shoulder and stretching out his arms.

"You might just be the dumbest person I've ever met," Nonon sighed.

A few seconds later, a giant portion of the Academy erupted into ball of fire. The explosions reverberated through the Academy courtyard, shaking the ground.

Several giant rocks were thrown around, littering the area around Ryuko, cutting her possible movement in half.

Ryuko's head twisted around fully, either unaware of her near trapped position, or just simply too far gone to care.

Four more explosions rocked the stadium, their origin being four of the giant pillars that had been put up just the other day.

The pillars fell like dominoes around Ryuko, trapping her into a singular spot.

"Gamaagori, now!"

Akio ran forwards, with Gamagoori right on his tail.

"You're sure about this?!"

"Yes!" Akio shouted. "Just do it!"

"Alright!"

Gamagoori grabbed Akio by the collar and tossed him into the air, catching him by the waist.

Jumping high into the air, Gamagoori reeled back and threw Akio directly at Ryuko.

Akio flew through the air like a human missile, barreling towards his target. Gamagoori had one hell of an arm.

There was a very brief moment when the thought that he could actually be insane passed through his head, but Akio quickly snuffed it out. The fast approaching Ryuko required his utmost attention.

Akio braced his entire body for the inevitable impact.

"Oof!"

Akio slammed into Ryuko's back, directly in-between Ryuko's shoulder blades. She stumbled a bit from the sudden impact, but she was still able to keep her footing.

Her body was covered in a slimy coating of blood and other juices that Akio really didn't want to know about. Feeling himself slip off of her very bloody body, Akio grabbed onto the shoulder that had Ryuko's head on it.

Just touching her made Akio want to recoil. Not only was her spongy and slimy skin disconcerting, but her body itself was boiling hot. It felt like he was touching a burner directly. He knew if he stayed here long, he'd no doubt have a few burns.

Unfortunately, that's just what Akio planned to do.

Ryuko roared and tried to reach Akio on her back, but due to his placement and her awkward arms, she couldn't touch him.

Scampering up her shoulder so that he was level with her head, he looped one arm around her thin neck and used his other arm to lock it into place. With his hold in place, he pressed hard into her neck and forced his arm into her chin to suffocate her.

Ryuko grunted and shook her whole body violently to try and lessen Akio's hold on her, but he wasn't going anywhere.

His plan was simple, really. Using a classic sleeper hold, he'd try and choke Ryuko until she passed out, and hopefully that'd revert her and Senketsu back to their regular states. It'd be difficult, and so far very painful, but it was better than letting Aikuro or Satsuki have their way with her.

Akio tightened his grip around her neck as he grit his teeth. He could feel the fabric of his hoodie begin to burn away at the touch of Ryuko's skin. He'd have to make this quick, or otherwise he'd burn away just like his clothing.

"Come on, Ryuko!" Akio grunted, pushing the crook of his arm further into her neck. "Snap out of it!"

Ryuko's head twisted around to face Akio.

Her deformed face was inches from his, her white, dead eyes boring holes into his own. Her breath reeked of pennies and iron. Her long, white fangs were dyed in blood, and sent shivers down Akio's spine just looking at them. If she had the choice, those fangs would be digging into Akio's jugular right now.

Ryuko tried to roar, but with the breath gone from her lungs, it only came out as a faint gurgling sound.

Akio clenched his eyes shut and kept his hold on her firm. He didn't want to look at her. Not like this.

"This isn't you, Ryuko! Wake up!"

His words were pointless, but it didn't stop Akio from trying.

At this point his clothing had all but burned away. He could feel the skin on his chest and arms begin to grown uncomfortably hot.

Feeling Ryuko begin to tilt dangerously to the side, Akio opened his eyes, hoping that it was finally over.

He was expecting to see her own eyes shut and unconscious, but they were still wide open, and now had a predatory gleam to them.

It was then Akio realized that he hadn't succeeded in suffocating Ryuko.

She had jumped into the air and had angled her back towards the ground, threatening to smash Akio between her and the hard cement.

Akio's eyes widened, a thousand possible outcomes running through his mind. Even if he let go of her right now, he was still going to get crushed. Holding on was his best option.

Preparing for the worst, Akio accepted his fate. This is what he got for being reckless.

The two slammed into the ground, Akio getting sandwiched in-between Ryuko and the floor.

The first part to hit the ground was Akio's left shoulder.

"GAH!"

The bone chilling sound of his shoulder popping out of its socket reverberated in his ears. Immediately, pain began to wash over Akio's left arm, nearly knocking him unconscious.

His right arm was still draped around Ryuko's neck, but his left arm had gone completely limp. Try as he might, he couldn't move it. With a dislocated shoulder, his left arm was useless.

Rolling on to her front, Ryuko pushed herself back into a standing position with Akio still hanging from her neck, albeit very loosely.

Akio hugged himself closer to Ryuko's back, desperately trying not to fall off. Panting from the pain and the exertion, he tried to tighten his arm around Ryuko's neck, but with the entirety of his left arm being dead weight, it was hardly any use.

Ryuko shook and twisted her body once more, trying to fling Akio from her back.

This time, she proved successful, given Akio's weakened state.

Akio fell from her back and hit the ground, crying out in pain as he landed on his dislocated shoulder.

Rolling to his right immediately, he timely dodged a downward swing from Ryuko's scissor blade.

Rising to his feet, Akio barred his teeth. This fight was either going to end with Ryuko regaining her senses, or it would be a fight to the death. Adrenaline pumped through his body, lessening the terrible

pain in his shoulder. In this moment, Akio felt more like an animal than a human. With his back to the wall and his life on the line, he felt more alive than he ever had.

In the corner of his vision he could see Satsuki charge Ryuko. Taking his eyes off of the monster in front of him, he addressed the president only one single time, leaving no room for discussion.

"Stay back, goddamn it! This is *MY* fight, not yours or anyone else's!"

And there was quite literally *no* room for discussion.

Ryuko pounced towards Akio, swinging her blade down in an overhead strike towards his head.

Akio strafed to the right to dodge the strike.

The blade crashed into the ground, sending dust and dirt flying every which way.

If he took one hit from her, he was as good as dead. He knew that, as well as everyone else. Maybe that was why Satsuki halted. It didn't matter to her if he died or not.

Ryuko attacked Akio once again, swinging in a horizontal arch towards his ribs.

Akio jumped back to avoid it, but he walked right into Ryuko's trap.

Lashing out with her other arm, she grabbed Akio by the collar and lifted him off of his feet.

Akio brought his hands up to try and dislodge Ryuko's grip on his shirt, but it was no use. Her grip was like iron, while Akio only had one good arm.

With her other arm, she brought the blade up to his neck, positioning it directly above his throat.

Akio could resort to his Plan B, but he doubted that he could grab the picture in his pocket before Ryuko pushed her blade through his neck.

Ryuko's face inched closer and closer, her dead eyes staring directly into his. It was chilling. Akio wanted to close his eyes, but he couldn't. Seeing someone he admired so much turn into something like this... He couldn't look away. Not anymore.

It seemed fitting he'd die like this. He was the one that came up with this plan, after all. It was only fitting he went down with the ship, and he'd be damned if he sat and watched while Satsuki or Aikuro and Tsumugu killed her.

Ryuko growled, the smell of her putrid breath reaching his nostrils.

Bringing her blade back, she swung at his throat.

Akio snorted at the last second, causing the beast before him to falter in her death strike.

"I should have known you'd be the death of me, you dumbass."

Ryuko tilted her head to the side, apparently confused by his statement.

"RYUKO, DON'T! DON'T KILL AKIO!"

Akio snapped his head to his right, seeing the Mankanshoku truck barreling towards the two.

Mako just saved his life.

Ryuko also turned her head towards the oncoming Mankanshokus, giving Akio the only opportunity he needed.

Swinging his waist forwards and upwards, he brought both of his legs up and wrapped them around Ryuko's arm, kicking her in the face with his two feet.

Ryuko roared in pain as a fresh stream of blood poured from her face, her grip on Akio lessening just enough so that he could drop back to the ground.

The minute Akio's feet touched the ground, he pounced forwards and wrapped his arm around Ryuko's midsection, tackling her to the ground with his good shoulder. As they fell to the floor, his hand had already reached into his pocket, feeling the familiar touch of a certain photograph he had snagged only a week ago.

Once again, Akio felt the burning sensation of Ryuko's flesh on his, but he ignored it.

It was time for Plan B.

It was time to get sentimental.

"You *IDIOT!* "

With his knees locked on each side of Ryuko's waist, he straightened up and brought his elbow down into Ryuko's face. With the picture in his hand, he couldn't exactly punch her, after all.

There was a reason this was his Plan B. Getting sentimental was never his strong suit.

"I can't believe you would *do this to me !*"

Akio punctuated his shout with another elbow to Ryuko's face.

"To Mako!"

He slammed his elbow into Ryuko's nose.

"To the Mankanshokus!"

He slammed his elbow once more into Ryuko's face.

"To your father! To Senketsu!"

He brought his head down and headbutted her in the nose, sending her head back and bouncing against the ground.

Surprisingly enough, Ryuko didn't do anything. She just took the beating.

Akio rose to his full height and shoved the picture he was holding in his hand in her face.

"Have you forgotten who you are?!"

The picture depicted a young Ryuko, no older than five, standing next to her father in front of their mansion. While Ryuko appeared rather indifferent in the photo, Dr. Matoi had the hints of a smile on his face as he held his daughter's hand.

Ryuko's dead eyes stared listlessly at the photo, not giving Akio any indication that she heard or felt any of what he had done or said to her.

"Damn it, this isn't you! This isn't the Ryuko I know!"

He could feel Ryuko struggle underneath his grip, so he slammed his elbow into her face once more for good measure.

The Mankanshoku truck skidded to a halt and Mako hopped off, running with all of her heart towards her two best friends before they could seriously hurt each other.

Satsuki stayed rooted in her spot, watching the scene play out curiously.

Nui had reappeared on the battleground and walked towards the two, rubbing the back of her head as she laughed at Akio's stupidity.

"What's the big idea interfering like that?"

Nui stopped suddenly when Satsuki brought her blade up to her throat.

"Hold your tongue and watch."

This all went unnoticed by the duo.

Ryuko didn't budge an inch at Akio's words. The only movement she made was that her eyes moved from the photo to the man above her.

"You're a stubborn, hot headed son of a bitch, but you aren't *this*," Akio motioned to her form with his good arm. "This... this monster I see before me... this isn't you."

Ryuko didn't make any movements, so Akio continued.

"I believe you said once that you wanted to know him better," Akio frowned, hoping his words reached her somehow. "Well, if that's true, I can tell you one thing. If your father saw you right now, I can assure you, he wouldn't approve of this... this *monster* you've become to avenge him. I know I don't."

Every single moment the two had shared these past few months ran through Akio's mind as he stared into the lifeless eyes of the girl beneath him. Every time the two talked, every time they exchanged jibes with each other, the times they shared their troubled pasts, the times they patched each other up after getting beat up. Everything.

Akio grit his teeth, the lump in his chest building. He could feel the protective walls he had placed up ever since he arrived at Honnouji Academy slowly begin to crumble away for good.

He remembered very clearly what Aikuro had said to him that day in the bar not so long ago.

'But, now I look at you, and I've seen how much happier you are.'

In this moment, Akio wasn't a Nudist Beach operative.

Nor was he a student.

He was just a kid who wanted his best friend back.

He wanted *her* back.

"You've saved me, and now it's time I returned the favor."

Akio brought his elbow up and back down into Ryuko's face once more.

And just like Ryuko Matoi, Akio Takahiro was a stubborn son of a bitch.

He continued this again and again, the pain, fatigue, and emotion finally getting to his head. At this point, all he could do was repeat the same motion over and over again, bringing his now bloody and raw elbow down into Ryuko's face. He wasn't aware of the surroundings around him, or of himself. All Akio could feel was the repetitive motion of his arm smacking against Ryuko's face.

The picture fell from his hand, drifting into the blood soaked dirt, all but forgotten.

Akio did not notice the steam erupt from Ryuko's body, nor did he notice the fact that Ryuko's body had slowly begun to change.

"Akio..."

Akio raised his arm once more, ready to bring it back down into Ryuko's face when he felt a small, cold hand brush against his cheek.

"You can stop now."

Akio flinched heavily at her touch, immediately stopping his arm from falling.

He blinked at the girl beneath of him. Ryuko was no longer the monster he had saw seconds before. She had reverted back to who she really was; the girl with her sailor uniform.

"Ryuko?"

"In the flesh," Ryuko replied, patting his cheek softly.

Akio stared wide eyed at her, still not believing what he was seeing. She certainly looked like Ryuko. The black hair with the red streak in it. The deep blue eyes. The familiar face.

"Thank you," Ryuko smiled, her thumb slowly wiping away the stray tear that had made its way down his face.

And with that, the last of the walls Akio had built were destroyed.

He didn't need them anymore. Hell, he didn't even want them.

Laughing, he looped his good arm around Ryuko's back, pulling her into a bear hug that he didn't plan on breaking soon.

He ignored the pain in his shoulder. He ignored the burns covering his body.

The only thing he felt was the slow breathing of the girl against his chest.

Ryuko returned the hug weakly, her arms draped over his shoulders.

"I'm so sorry," She mumbled into his shoulder.

"Don't be."

Mako collided in to the two, wrapping her arms around the both of them and ensnaring them into a great big group hug.

"Oh, thank god you're both alright!" Mako sobbed, burying her face in-between their heads.

Akio brought his head up and rested it atop of hers.

"I'm so sorry I worried you, Mako."

"Me too..." Ryuko whispered.

Mako sobbed once more, her grip tightening around her two best and only friends.

"Just promise me you won't do it again! Gosh, you both are such dummies! Dummies, dummies, dummies!"

Before Akio could reply, both he and Mako felt Ryuko slump against the two of them.

"Ryuko?!" Mako screeched, recoiling and looking to Akio. "Is she dead?!"

Akio backed away from the hug, resting Ryuko down slowly on the ground and checked her pulse.

"She's fine," Akio sighed. "She just passed out."

Hearing the sound of a sword scraping against steel, Akio turned his head to see Satsuki standing behind him, tall and proud as always.

"Be proud, Takahiro," Satsuki began. "Thanks to your quick thinking and level head, hundreds of lives were saved today, including hers. You wanted to make a difference, and so you did."

Akio gaped at Satsuki's words, unsure of what to say. She was... commending him?

"Thank you..." Akio paused, choosing his next word carefully. "Satsuki."

Satsuki nodded and turned to walk away, her hair billowing in the wind as she walked.

Later that day...

Akio sat on one of the bar-stools in the familiar rundown bar, nursing an ice cold, celebratory beer. With Mr. Mankanshoku working on the unconscious Ryuko, and Mako falling fast asleep the moment they returned home, Akio was able to slip out for a little alone time.

Sighing in satisfaction, he placed his beer down, smiling like an idiot

He had several burns all over his body, and his left arm was in a sling, but all in all, things weren't too shabby.

At least not to him.

"Hey, Akio," Aikuro greeted as he sat down next to him. "How're you feeling?"

Akio smiled at his brother, pushing over the extra beer he had next to him.

Aikuro nodded his thanks and took a sip.

"I feel pretty good," Akio answered honestly. "I mean, other than the dislocated shoulder and these first degree burns all over my chest, arms, and thighs, I'm feeling alright."

"That's what will happen to you when you act reckless, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," Akio chuckled. He had heard this spiel before, but even so he still enjoyed it. "I'll be more careful, yada yada."

Aikuro rose an eyebrow over his beer.

"You really are in a good mood."

"I am," Akio nodded, taking a sip of his own. "And you know, I think I've finally come to a decision about myself."

"Oh? And what's that?"

Akio placed his beer down and turned to face his brother, still smiling.

"I quit."

Aikuro blinked, placing his own drink down to face him.

"You quit?"

"Yep. I've decided that Nudist Beach Akio is not who I want to be anymore."

A smirk slowly made its way on to Aikuro's face at hearing Akio say these words.

"Is that so? What Akio do you want to be now, then?"

"The Akio that's the son of the Mikisugis, that's the brother of Aikuro, and that's friends to Ryuko and Mako. That's all I need."

Aikuro chuckled and shook his head.

"You're awfully poetic, you know that?"

Akio shrugged and turned back to his drink, taking a sip.

Aikuro placed a hand on his shoulder to get his attention, his expression growing serious.

"This is really what you want to do?"

Akio looked to him and nodded, his face firm and unyielding.

"Then that's good enough for me," Aikuro grinned and raised his drink for a toast.

They knocked their glasses together and each took a long sip, both of them letting out a long sigh of satisfaction.

And so, the two enjoyed their ice cold beers together not as Nudist Beach operatives, but as brothers.

And there you have it!

Talk about a chapter. This episode in the anime was easily one of my faves, so I hope I did it justice.

Like I said, I feel like every character went through something here, and came out of it for the better.

I also hope I wrote Akio and Ryuko's moment well. In the anime, it's obviously Mako that pulls her back, but I opted for Akio to do it. For reasons.

I really wanted to write it as an emotional, gritty scene, where Akio really lets his inner emotions show instead of being somewhat reserved. And when he finally does let those walls down, he comes to some pretty big life changing decisions.

So, how will Akio's decision and his new outlook of himself come into play later? Well, I guess we'll have to wait and see.

Thanks for reading everyone! This was arguably the most important chapter to date, so I hope I did it well.

Until next time!

Moving On

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Instead of immediately moving on to the episode after Ryuko's rampage, I decided to add this little filler in. You'll probably understand why as you read. It's a little shorter than the last chapter, but that isn't to say a lot of important things happen.

Not much to really say about this one, except for a big thank you to CrimsonHeresy for proofreading one of the scenes.

Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

It was late when Akio returned to the Mankanshoku household. As expected, the house was quiet, with the only light in the entire shack coming from the dining room. Everyone must have gone to bed already, or so he assumed.

Akio sighed and ran a hand through his hair. His thoughts drifted to Ryuko, and how she was holding up. After the day she had, probably not well.

Walking through the dining room to his room, he stopped when he noticed that there was in fact was a person awake this late.

"Hello, Akio," Mrs. Mankanshoku greeted him, motioning to the steaming tea pot on the table. "Join me for a cup of tea?"

"Why not?" Akio shrugged and took a spot opposite of her, accepting the cup of tea she poured for him.

"How're you feeling?" She asked in-between sips.

"Not my best day," Akio answered truthfully. "But, definitely not my worst, either."

"That's good," Mrs. Mankanshoku giggled. "I think?"

Akio chuckled and took a sip of his tea. Damn, was it good. Now, he was no tea connoisseur, but damn if it wasn't delicious.

The two sat in silence for several moments, simply enjoying the taste of a hot pot of tea.

"Has Ryuko regained consciousness at all?" Akio broke the silence.

Mrs. Mankanshoku paused and placed her cup down, looking at Akio with a surprisingly serious expression.

"Yes, she has."

"How is she?"

"Not great. She hasn't spoken at all, except for her asking how you were doing."

Akio bit his cheek. Now he wished he hadn't left.

"Which is why..."

Mrs. Mankanshoku reached under the table and pulled out a plate filled to the brim with croquettes and passed it over to Akio.

"I was hoping you could get her to eat something. I think she'd listen to you."

"Really?" Akio blinked. "What makes you say that?"

"Call it motherly intuition," She winked.

Akio laughed and shook his head, accepting the plate of fried goods. He was always very fond of Mrs. Mankanshoku. Ever since he had

first came to their place for dinner, she treated him like one of her own. Even though they were on rough times as well, she never turned him away, and always gave him food to eat, and even a roof to stay under.

Her cheerfulness always brightened him up, too. Even on the worst of days like today, she always had a smile on her face and a plate of food in her hand, ready to brighten up the days of the people she loved.

In a way, Akio saw her as a second mother.

"I'll give it a try. I was meaning to talk to her anyway."

Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled, all the while giving Akio a very pointed look.

"And you make sure you eat some too, young man."

Akio was ready to protest, but his growling stomach had already answered for the both of them.

"Heh... " Akio scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "Maybe I should."

Mrs. Mankanshoku grinned victoriously and shooed him off to his shared bedroom.

"That's right. Now, off you go, it's getting late. Young men also need their sleep too, you know."

Akio rolled his eyes and rose to his feet, walking towards the bedroom when he turned back to address Mrs. Mankanshoku one more time.

"Thank you, ma'am. For everything."

Mrs. Mankanshoku blinked, startled by Akio's words, but she recovered quickly and gave him a sweet, loving smile.

"Of course, Akio. Good night."

"Night."

Akio turned and walked towards his room, steeling himself for what would inevitably be a tough conversation.

Taking a deep breath and opening the door, Akio walked inside.

The room was dark, the moon being the only light to illuminate it. It was cold, mostly because the window on the opposite side of the room was wide open and the wind billowed unbidden inside the small room.

Ryuko sat in her sleeping bag, her head tilted down and her bangs covering her eyes. The moonlight illuminated her form, painting quite the picture of the girl in her bunny pajamas.

She didn't acknowledge Akio entering the room, nor did she turn her head towards him. She only kept her eyes downward.

Akio walked over to his own sleeping bag, plopping down on its soft surface and placing the food out in front of him.

He stared at Ryuko unblinking, his arms crossed. The right words on what to say to her would come to his mind at some point, he hoped.

Ryuko lifted her head ever so slightly, her eyes meeting his before they moved back to the floor.

"How's your shoulder?"

Ryuko's question shattered the tranquil silence of the night, bringing Akio back to reality.

"It's fine. Mr. Mankanshoku was able to put it back in place, no problem. He said it should be back to normal in a few weeks."

He neglected to tell her that he refused any painkillers. After the reaction he had to them last time, he wasn't exactly jonsing for another double dose of morphine that the back-alley doctor seemed so keen on dishing out. His shoulder *did* hurt, but she didn't need that weighing down on her conscious as well.

Ryuko nodded, but said nothing else.

"How're you feeling?"

Ryuko didn't respond.

Akio sighed and looked over to where Senketsu was hanging, hoping maybe he'd give him some insight, even though he really couldn't. In the moonlight, he could see Senketsu's one eye looking straight at him, as if he was pleading for his help in this matter. He was just as lost as Akio was.

"I got some food here," Akio said and pushed the plate of croquettes towards her. "You want to join me? I don't know about you, but I'm pretty hungry."

Ryuko said nothing.

Akio sighed again, but tried not to let his irritation show.

Reaching out, he grabbed a croquette and shoveled it into his mouth.

"Oh, god!" Akio over exaggerated his moan. "I forgot how good Mrs. Mankanshokus cooking was!"

Still, nothing.

So much for wanting to talk to him.

Grabbing the plate, he grunted as he pushed himself off of the ground.

Ryuko finally showed some reaction, eying him curiously as he walked over to her.

"Alright, Ryuko," Akio began and sat down next to her. "Level with me here. At least have one."

She didn't say anything or look at him, but she did reach out and grab a croquette to nibble at.

Akio smiled victoriously. It was a start.

Taking one of his own, Akio took a few bites of it, not bothering to interrupt the silence this time.

Lying down on his back as he ate, he stared up at the ceiling above him.

She'd talk to him when she was ready.

The sunlight poured in through the open window, causing Akio to stir.

His eyes fluttering open, he realized that he had fallen asleep in his spot next to Ryuko. Ryuko was still sitting up in her sleeping bag, her eyes staring listlessly off into space. It was as if she didn't even notice Akio's presence in the room, or Senketsu's.

Considering her pale skin and the bags under her eyes, Akio guessed she hadn't slept a wink.

Sitting up, he arched and twisted his back, resulting in a very satisfying popping sound.

"Class will be starting soon," Ryuko stated matter-of-factly.

"Yeah," Akio yawned and stretched. "I'm not going."

Ryuko still didn't speak, but Akio noted with a great deal of pleasure that the plate of food he had brought in last night had been eaten.

Ryuko glanced over at him, their eyes meeting only for the second time in the past day.

"You're still here..." She whispered.

"I'm not leaving, Ryuko."

Ryuko shook her head softly, apparently not satisfied with his answer.

"No, *why* are you still here?" She murmured, tilting her head down.
"You could leave. You *should* leave."

"I said I'm not."

"Why?!" Ryuko snapped.

She finally turned to face him fully, her eyes a storm of sadness, regret, and anger. It seemed that she was ready to talk.

"Because," Akio started, an unfamiliar tone of uncertainty making its way into his voice. "As infuriating as you might be, you mean too much to me for me to leave now."

"... You mean that?" Ryuko asked, a small glimmer of hope gleaming in her eyes.

"I do," Akio answered resolutely.

"Even... even after I almost killed you?"

Akio bit back a wince. Of course that'd still be bothering her.

It'd be best he nipped this in the bud now.

"You wouldn't have killed me," Akio replied flatly.

"Stop lying," Ryuko growled, more at herself than anyone else. "I lost control yesterday, utterly and completely."

Ryuko exhaled shakily, running a hand across her face, Akio's words in one ear and out the other. That small look of hope that had been present in her eyes just seconds before was all but gone.

"I would have killed you. If you hadn't stopped me, I would have killed you, Mako, everyone..."

"No, you wouldn't have."

"And what makes you so sure?" Ryuko mumbled dejectedly.

"I'd like to think I know you pretty well by now, Ryuko," Akio answered calmly. "And I know you're no killer, despite what you might think. I knew you wouldn't push that blade any further."

"Excuse me if I'm not as sure as you," Ryuko scoffed.

"You *did* stop though, didn't you? I may have helped, but in the end it was you who took back control of yourself."

"That's not the point..." Ryuko whispered, clutching the sides of her head as she stared at the ground. "The fact of the matter is that I did it in the first place. I don't even deserve to have you as my friend."

"Ryuko, that's just not true. I still trust you with my life, and nothing you've done or said can change that."

Ryuko only shook her head, still not convinced.

"You're believing in the wrong person, then."

"Ryuko..."

"Just shut up, I'm done talking."

To clarify her point, Ryuko turned away in her seat like a child, facing the wall.

Doesn't deserve to be his friend, huh? Well, Akio could fix that foolish idea, hopefully by doing something with her that he's only shared with one other person before.

"Have it your way," Akio grunted as he stood up, extending a hand to Ryuko. "Turn around."

Of course, she didn't.

"Turn around and face me damn it, or are you too busy wallowing in self-pity to do even that much?"

Ryuko growled dangerously and whipped her head towards Akio, her teeth barred and her fists already raised.

"Just shut the fuck up-!"

Ryuko's words died on her lips as she narrowed her eyes at the offered hand, then shifted her gaze to Akio, raising an eyebrow.

"I knew that would do it," Akio smirked. "Just humor me this once."

Despite Akio's words, Ryuko still didn't move.

"Please. For me?"

Ryuko breathed out slowly, eventually obeying Akio's plead and grabbing his hand and hoisting herself up.

Keeping his right hand in hers, he slipped his left arm out of his sling and moved it under her arm, placing his hand on her shoulder blade.

"What in god's name are you doing?"

"Put your hand on my left shoulder."

"What?"

"Just do it."

Ryuko sighed and did as she was told, placing his hand on his shoulder.

She quickly realized what kind of position Akio had just put her in.

"Akio, please, just leave me-"

"Hey, you dug your own grave with all of those jokes," Akio grinned. "Come on, it'll be fun."

Ryuko frowned, clearly not amused with his joke, but that still didn't stop Akio.

"I'll go slow, so just follow my movements."

Akio stepped forwards, and Ryuko stepped back.

Akio stepped to the right, and Ryuko followed.

He stepped back, and Ryuko went forwards.

He stepped to the left, and so did Ryuko.

Ryuko stumbled a bit, so she turned her head down to see where her feet were going.

"Ah, ah, ah," Akio clicked his tongue and bopped her forehead with his own. "No looking down at your feet. If you're always looking down, you'll never see where you're going, understand?"

Ryuko rolled her eyes, but did as she was told and turned her head back up, her eyes darting everywhere in the room except for the two green eyes watching her closely.

The two continued to dance around the room, oblivious to the four pairs of eyes watching them from the crack in the doorway.

Ryuko's hostile nature eventually fizzled out as she became more and more familiar with the patterned movements.

Forwards, to the right, backwards, to the left. Over and over again around the room.

And dare he say it, Akio could swear he saw a ghost of a smile grace her lips as he lead her around the room. His plan had worked. Sort of.

"You see, Ryuko, you always have to keep your feet moving, and have confidence in those movements. You have to believe enough in yourself that you won't make the wrong step and stumble."

Akio smiled, his hand tightening around hers.

"And even if you do fall down or stumble, a good partner will always make sure you get back on your feet and keep moving."

For the first time in the past two days, Ryuko smiled, albeit a very small one.

"So, we had to go through this whole ordeal just for you to tell me that?"

"Maybe not," Akio shrugged. "But it's fun, isn't it?"

"Maybe a little," Ryuko mumbled, looking away shyly.

Akio threw his head back and laughed at that, finding great amusement in her embarrassment. It was always such a personal accomplishment for him to fluster her, and to even see her enjoying herself right now was something that Akio could pride himself on.

His laughter proved to be contagious, as even Ryuko herself let out a tiny giggle, thank god. He was worried that maybe he had taken it far, but in the end that worry seemed for naught.

"Why don't I go make us some breakfast?"

As Akio moved to break their hold on one another, he found that Ryuko's hand gripped tighter around his, stopping him in his tracks.

"Ryuko?"

Ryuko looked down at her feet, once again averting Akio's gaze.

"Can we keep doing this? For just a tiny bit longer?"

Akio blinked, surprised by her request, before breaking out into a wide grin.

"I don't see why not."

Akio placed his hand back on her back, his other hand gripping Ryuko's tightly. The two continued their slow dance, still completely oblivious to the starry eyes watching them.

As they moved around the room, Ryuko tentatively placed her head on Akio's shoulder, as if the action alone would cause one of the two of them to recoil suddenly.

"Thank you for being here," She whispered softly, hesitant in her words. This was an entirely new experience for her. She had never been one to let her inner feelings show, and neither had Akio for that matter. Her snapping at him earlier had proven that much. But, with Akio, Ryuko didn't seem to mind that much, and the same went for him.

Akio rested his chin on her head, repeating the same answer he had told her only moments before.

"I told you I'm not leaving."

"Hello?"

Akio walked out of his bedroom and into the dining room of the shack, looking back and forth around the small room. It seemed that him and Ryuko were both totally alone here in the house, and if the

wide open front door was any indication, it seemed that the Mankanshokus had left in a hurry.

"I wonder why?" Akio mumbled to himself, scratching at his head with his good hand. It seemed strange to leave the front door open. They must have been in a hurry, or maybe there was an emergency of some sorts? How curious. He could have sworn he had heard them running around the house seconds before he had left his room.

Shrugging, Akio walked into the equally small kitchen, opening up their tiny refrigerator to inspect its contents. There were still some left over croquettes, but Akio wanted to cook for Ryuko. It seemed like the right thing to do.

Well, it was slim pickings, but he could make it work. Except that he'd need some help to do so.

"Ryuko!" Akio called out as he pulled out a case of eggs. "Come here!"

No response.

Akio sighed and plopped the eggs on the stove. Oh, she wasn't going to get away with not responding after the moment they had just shared, and he definitely didn't want her being alone to wallow in her dark and depressing thoughts.

"Ryuuuko!"

He heard an exaggerated sigh come from the opposite side of the shack, followed by several stomps as Ryuko made her way to the kitchen.

"What?!" Ryuko shouted once she came into view.

Akio looked her up and down, trying not to let his disappointment show that she hadn't changed out of her pajamas. He was hoping that their talk might get her to put back on Senketsu, but it appears

not. In the end, he was only able to mend the bridge between the two of them, but not between her and Senketsu.

"I take it you've never really cooked before?"

"Well, no," Ryuko answered, crossing her arms. "When I was attending schools across the country, I didn't exactly have the time or the place to cook. I basically lived off of shitty fast food."

"I thought as much," Akio nodded and beckoned her to come closer. "Come here."

Ryuko blinked. "Huh?"

"I only have one good arm, so I'll need some help cooking."

"You want my help?" Ryuko rose an eyebrow. "The girl who once burned water?"

"... That's possible?" Akio started before shaking that train of thought from his head. "I'll tell you what to do and you'll do it. It's only scrambled eggs and toast, it won't be that hard."

Ryuko sighed and hung her head, but walked over to Akio nonetheless.

"Alright, tell me what to do."

"Good," Akio smiled and leaned against the wall, content to let her do most of the work. "How many eggs are there?"

Ryuko opened up the case of eggs, counting all that was left.

"Six."

"That works. Crack them and put them into a bowl."

Ryuko nodded and grabbed a stray bowl out of one of the cabinets and placed the first egg over it, but stopped before cracking it.

"Uh... how do I crack an egg?"

Akio bit his lip, fighting the urge to laugh.

"You're joking, right?"

"Well, I mean, there's like a baby chicken in here, right?" She asked, eyeing him worriedly. "How do we separate it from the rest of the egg?"

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Akio snickered under his breath. "I wouldn't worry about that, Ryuko. These eggs are safe."

"What's so funny?" Ryuko frowned.

"Nothing, nothing," Akio shook his head, biting back a fit of giggles. "Just crack the shell on the edge of the bowl and let it drain into it, without letting any of the shell in."

Ryuko nodded and began cracking, letting the innards of each egg slide into the ceramic bowl.

"Now what?"

"Grab a fork and stir it hard until it becomes all yellow."

"Alright," Ryuko said and did as she was instructed.

Akio watched absentmindedly as she beat the eggs, dueling with whether or not to ask her how she was feeling. In the end, maybe it was for the best if he didn't. He knew that if he was in Ryuko's shoes, he'd get pretty annoyed if everyone kept inquiring about his well-being. Besides, sometimes just the company of a good friend was enough. At least he hoped that was still the case.

Pushing himself off of the wall, he walked over behind Ryuko, reaching in front of her to open one of the cabinets and pulling a skillet.

"That's good enough," Akio told her as he looked over her shoulder. Placing the skillet on the burner, he turned on the stove. "Now just pour it into the skillet and we'll let it cook."

Content that Ryuko could do that much, Akio walked away and grabbed two slices of bread, placing the both of them into the beat up toaster that the Mankanshokus had laying around.

It didn't take long for the eggs to finish, because, well, they're eggs. It's not very difficult to cook eggs.

The two took their plates over to the sit-down table in the dining room, both taking seats opposite each other.

Hopefully some more food in her stomach my cheer her up some. Akio had absolutely no clue on what to do from there, but he thought he'd just wing it. It was working alright so far, why change it up now?

"Good work, Ryuko," Akio smirked as he took a bite. "For a girl who can apparently burn water, you did good."

Ryuko rolled her eyes and took a bite of her own.

They really weren't too bad. Eggs could only be so good by themselves, but Akio didn't want to tell her that.

"... Is it really alright for you to be here with me?" Ryuko asked tentatively between bites of toast.

"Of course it is," Akio responded, raising an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Don't you have, like, some Nudist Beach crap to go do?"

Akio exhaled slowly and placed his toast down.

"No, because I quit."

Ryuko stared wide eyed at him, the forkful of eggs stopping before they reached her mouth.

"You quit?"

"I did."

"Why?"

Akio shrugged. "I just didn't want to be *that* guy anymore."

"That guy?"

"You know, the Nudist Beach guy, the guy who's dedicated to his work instead of the more important things in life," Akio elaborated.

Ryuko hummed, absently picking at her plate of eggs with her fork. Her eyes glossed over as she obviously got lost in her own thoughts. Akio knew it must have been something important.

"Maybe it'd be best if I quit-"

"Don't," Akio cut her off. "Our situations aren't the same."

Ryuko only shook her head, her eyes still on the plate of food in front of her.

"You're still worried," Akio stated, his voice softening.

"Of course I am, Akio," Ryuko grumbled, resting her head in her hand as she poked at her food. "Is it even safe for me to wear Senketsu again? After what happened?"

"You learn from your mistakes, and you grow stronger, Ryuko. You can't always look to the past, otherwise you'll never be able to see the future."

"As pretty as that might sound, it isn't that easy for me," Ryuko sighed. "My *entire* life has been dedicated to the past, Akio. I've

been searching for Dad's killer for what feels like years now. I can't just forget about that. Just like I can't forget about yesterday."

Akio didn't have anything to say to that. She was entirely and completely right. She's devoted her entire self to finding her father's killer. Hell, she wouldn't even be here right now if her leads didn't bring her here. Damn, it was terribly insensitive of him to tell her to try and 'move on.' He should have been smarter than that.

"What?" Ryuko looked up at Akio. "What happened to all of those words of wisdom you were spouting earlier?"

"No," Akio shook his head slowly, putting down his utensils. "No, you're right. I'm sorry, that was rude of me."

"Don't be sorry you idiot, you *are* right, after all. You've actually been very sweet today, if not annoying," Ryuko shot a quick glare at him before continuing. "Hell, this morning was the most fun I've had in days."

"Yeah, not so funny now, is it?" Akio goaded cheekily. "I knew my 'housewife' skills would come in handy one day."

Ryuko snorted and shook her head.

"So..." She began slowly. "What now?"

"I don't know," Akio sighed. "I guess we just keep moving forwards."

"We?"

"Well, of course," Akio grinned. "Just because the dance stopped doesn't mean we aren't still partners."

"Partners..." Ryuko repeated, liking the way the word rolled off of her tongue as a smile grew on her lips. She had never really called anyone that before. "I like that."

Knock, knock, knock!

The banging sound coming from the front door pulled them both from their thoughts and back to reality.

The two shared a look and Akio shrugged, pushing himself off of the floor.

"Who could be visiting at this hour?" Akio murmured as he walked to the door, opening it.

It was the last person he was expecting.

"Good morning, Akio Takahiro!" Gamagoori greeted in his usual bravado.

Ira Gamagoori stood in front of him, tall and straight, with his hands clasped behind his back. He wasn't wearing his usual Goku uniform, and was instead wearing a bright yellow track suit with the Academy's logo emblazoned on the front.

Two One Stars stood behind Gamagoori, giving Akio the impression that they were planning on escorting someone.

"If you've come for Ryuko, then you can get the hell out of here," Akio growled and stepped out of the house, closing the door behind him so that Ryuko couldn't see, nor hear them.

"We're not here for Matoi," Gamagoori shook his head, raising a hand to alleviate him. "We're actually here for you, Takahiro."

Akio's angry expression dissolved in a second, replaced by one of confusion.

"Me?"

"That's correct," Gamagoori nodded. "Your presence has been requested by Lady Satsuki herself."

And there you have it!

Got some fluffy moments, some serious moments, and some emotional moments. The whole enchilada. And, we get to see a side of Ryuko that we haven't seen so much of! Self-doubt!

And of course, for those of you who guessed that Akio's sick dancing skills would make an appearance, well, you were right. Uh... it was all totally planned from the start, I swear.

I actually had this point in the anime pinpointed for awhile now as a serious moment between the two, along with a few other scenes later on down the road.

If you can't tell where this relationship is going by now, then shame on you.

Speaking of which, this is actually the first time I've written a budding romance like this, so please, let me know how I'm doing! You know, if I'm taking it too fast, too slow, or if it's just bad. I'd love my readers opinions on it, so I can improve as a writer.

Next chapter we'll get to Episode 13 of the anime, and we'll discover why Satsuki is wanting to meet with Akio in the first place! Stay tuned!

Thanks for reading everyone, and I'll see you next time!

Dangerous Liaisons

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Sorry for the longer wait with this one. I'll be honest, I got caught up this weekend with watching EVO, LCS, and Mad Max. Plus, this chapter is pretty long, and it took a while to finish this puppy up.

A lot of stuff going on this chapter. A lot, a lot. I think you guys will like it, or at least I hope you do!

And, a big announcement, Before My Body is Dry is now the most reviewed OC story! Thanks so much guys. All of the support and love you've all given me is more than I could have ever asked for, and I appreciate it all so much. So, you readers, followers, favoriters, and reviewers out there, thank you all for tuning in with each update and giving my humble story a read.

Here it is everyone, and I hope you like it!

Oh, and before we start, I don't know how long this episode takes place for in the anime, so I made my own little time table.

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Akio followed Ira Gamagoori closely as he lead him through the halls of the Academy. Two One Stars walked on either side of him, giving him no other option than to follow the Disciplinary Chair to their destination.

"You know the escort isn't necessary, right?" Akio mentioned, eyeing the two men beside him warily. "I couldn't fight back if I wanted to."

"It probably wasn't," Gamagoori nodded, turning his head back to Akio. "But, you haven't exactly been the most hospitable when it comes to Lady Satsuki. As Disciplinary Committee Chair, I shall take no such risks."

Akio blanched, nearly stopping in his tracks if one of the One Stars hadn't pushed him forwards.

"You... you knew about that?"

Gamagoori frowned, the sunlight coming in from the window beside him gleamed off of his eyes, giving him a rather sinister look.

"We know a lot of things, Takahiro. You would do best to remember that in the upcoming days."

The upcoming days?

What did he have to do with the upcoming days?

They continued walking through the halls of the school, eventually making it to a secluded hallway with a door that had a electronic lock at the end of the hall.

Gamagoori punched in a code on the keypad and the doors split apart, revealing a very spacious elevator.

"Come along, Takahiro," Gamagoori said as he walked into the elevator and turned to the three. "Leave us."

The One Stars nodded, giving a proper salute before walking away.

Akio rolled his eyes at that, but he did as he was told and followed Gamagoori into the elevator.

Gamagoori punched in another code on the elevator's control panel, and away they went towards the very top of the tower.

Akio had to admit, he was impressed with the security measures inside the Academy itself. The last time he confronted Satsuki, he had turned off the electricity to the place and scaled the side of it. Of course, given the fact that Gamagoori had already hinted to that occurrence, it seemed that he wasn't careful enough.

"So, what does the Lady want me for?" Akio asked as he watched the numbers above the doors light up.

"You'll find out soon enough," Gamagoori answered cryptically.

Akio sighed, resigned to his fate. It looked like he'd have to wait until she told him herself. He'd be a liar if he said he wasn't more than a teensy bit nervous about it. It almost felt as if he was being lead to his death.

The doors to the elevator opened up, revealing a marble-tiled hallway with an ornate wooden door at the end of it.

"This is where we part ways, Takahiro. Enjoy your conversation with Lady Satsuki, and make sure to be respectful."

Gulping, Akio stepped out of the elevator and into the hallway, the doors behind him immediately closing shut as the elevator flew off.

"Better get this over with."

Walking to the large double door, Akio took a deep breath and placed his hand on the polished wood, pushing it open.

The room that greeted him wasn't much different than the hallway he had just walked through. The floor's design hadn't changed any, but the wall to his right had been replaced with glass, allowing a beautiful view of the city down below to be seen if you looked out. The room itself had no lights other than a few candles, as the natural lighting of the sun coming in through the glass was more than enough.

At the far end of the room stood a butler wearing a black and white tuxedo, with a white towel draped over one arm and a plate of tea in the other. He was an elderly gentleman, with a number of wrinkles adorning his face, and a bald head to match. To be honest, he looked exactly like Akio would imagine a butler to look like.

Closest to him sat Satsuki Kiryuin herself, her body hidden from view due to the back of her chair, but her heels and hair could still be seen.

"Akio Takahiro," The butler announced as he walked over to him, bowing slightly. "We have been expecting the young sir. Please, take a seat."

Walking over to the seat pointed out by the butler, Akio sat down on its cushioned surface, and directly across from Satsuki.

Satsuki drank from an ornate teacup with her eyes closed, still not acknowledging his presence.

Letting out a very reserved sigh of satisfaction, the Academy's president opened her eyes, taking in and sizing Akio up in less than a second.

"Takahiro," Satsuki greeted, bowing her head slightly in a greeting then turned to her butler. "Soroi, bring our guest a cup of tea."

Soroi nodded, already pouring out a cup for him.

"Uh..." Akio hesitated, feeling like a fish out of water in Satsuki's environment. "That's quite alright. Let's just get to what you've called me here for you."

"No," Satsuki replied firmly. "Our talk will be long, and it would be rude of me to not provide a drink to my guest."

"... Fine," Akio conceded, accepting his tea from the butler. "Thank you."

The butler bowed and backed away, leaving their presence.

Akio took a sip of his tea, his eyes staring at Satsuki from above the rim.

Holy shit.

Trying to not let his surprise show, he slowly placed his tea down in his lap similar to the way Satsuki had, licking his lips as to not waste any drop of the sweet nectar.

It was the best damn tea he had ever tasted in his life.

Satsuki smirked upon noticing this.

"I take it the tea is to your liking?"

"Yeah, it's alright," Akio lied. It was actually fucking delicious, but he wouldn't tell her that. "So, what is it that you want from me?"

"Straight to the point? So be it."

Satsuki raised her cup and immediately Soroi walked over to her, pouring more of the steaming tea into her glass.

"We are on the brink of great change, Takahiro," Satsuki declared and took a small sip from her tea. "And I want you to be a part of it."

Akio furrowed his brow at the president and took a sip of his drink.

"Excuse me?"

"In five days time, Honnouji Academy will commence its nationwide conquest of academy's across the country. Those who still oppose us shall fall and be ushered into Honnouji Academy's rule."

Akio paused, taking her words in but scarcely believing it.

"You're... planning an invasion?"

"You could say such," Satsuki nodded, addressing Akio with firm, unblinking eyes. "Similar to that of a wild fire, Honnouji Academy will spread across Japan, burning down the unjust and unruly and cleansing them, repurposing them to our own purpose."

Akio quirked an eyebrow.

"And that purpose being?"

Satsuki closed her eyes and took a sip of tea.

"That is not for you to know, Takahiro. Just know that in the end, I, and the rest of Honnouji Academy, will be on the right side. The victorious side."

"I believe that Adolf Hitler had the same sentiment, no?"

Satsuki opened her eyes, giving Akio a glare that would send shivers down the spines of even the most formidable of men.

"Say what you will about me, but I do what I must. I do what is right. You know that sentiment as well as I do."

"Whatever," Akio rolled his eyes. He wasn't about to get into an argument about ethics with Satsuki Kiryuin. "Where do I play into all of this?"

"My Elite Four will be leading our students to victory in three of the major cities across Japan. I want you to join them."

Akio blinked at the president, more than startled by her proposition.

"Me?"

"Yes," Satsuki affirmed.

Akio chuckled for a few seconds, eventually breaking down into full out laughter.

Soroi looked very insulted by the No Stars lack of respect to his Lady, but he refused to speak out of turn. Unlike some people, he at least had the common courtesy to not speak out of line.

"You're asking the man that threatened your life to be one of your lackeys?" Akio snorted and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but that has to be the most ridiculous thing I ever heard."

"Not one of my 'lackeys,' as you so crudely put it," Satsuki replied calmly, taking a sip of her tea. "No, you will stand tall with my Elite, and command our students to victory."

"And why me?" Akio smirked, amused by her request. "Out of all of the students at this school, I had to be your last choice."

"That is where you are wrong," Satsuki corrected. "You are my first."

Now he was surprised.

"Huh?"

"Not many people have threatened my life before, Takahiro, and of that few two of them are now a part of my inner circle, and one of them is the wearer of the Pure Life Fiber Kamui Senketsu."

Satsuki took another sip of her tea, something akin to a small grin growing on the usually expressionless face.

"You're either very courageous, or very stupid. Either way, you are in good company."

"So, that's your criteria on judging people? On if they threaten you or not?" Akio shot back.

"You showed great leadership the other day, Takahiro," Satsuki replied, ignoring his remark. "You commanded my Elite without a second thought, and did so calmly and with a level head. I could use someone like you; a tactician, if you will."

Akio's expression softened on thinking back to that day. If it weren't for Satsuki and the rest of the Elite Four, he may have never been able to bring Ryuko back to reality. In fact, if it weren't for them, it could be very possible that Ryuko would be dead right now.

"Alright," Akio exhaled slowly. He'd give her the benefit of the doubt, for now. "So what if I did. Who's to say that I would help you? I'm not exactly your biggest fan, you know."

Satsuki's eyes lit up as she placed her tea back down in her lap. It was as if she were waiting for this line of questioning the entire conversation.

She was the fisherman, and Akio just took the bait.

"This war is happening with or without you, Takahiro," She explained. "And I'm giving you the chance to be at the very front of it. I am giving you the chance to make a *difference* ."

"A difference?"

"Yes. This conflict may very well blow up more than any of us have expected, and I'm giving you the opportunity to make sure that doesn't happen," Satsuki continued. "I'm giving you a stage to prevent destruction; to mold our fight as you see fit."

Akio sat up in his seat and placed his tea on the ground. Satsuki knew that would strike a chord with him.

"Explain."

"I'd be sending you to the largest of the three cities, Osaka, to help Sanageyama lead our students to victory over their high school. With your mind and Sanageyama's leadership, I have no doubt that you can triumph over them quickly and efficiently."

Akio's eyebrows twitched.

"... Osaka?"

"Yes," Satsuki answered, giving him a very knowing look. Oh, she knew full well what Osaka meant to Akio.

"And of course, for your allegiance to your school, you shall be rewarded."

At the sound of Satsuki's heel tapping on the ground, the wooden doors opened, and in walked the Sewing Club president himself, wheeling in a dresser in front of him.

Without further instruction, Iori opened the dresser doors, revealing its innards for all to see.

Inside hung a black jacket, with a pair of black pants to match. The Academy's symbol was emblazoned in white in the very center of the jacket, breaking apart down the zipper. Akio could see the lump of shoulder pads on the shoulders, but unlike Sanageyama or Gamagori's uniforms, there were no spikes. The outfit also came with black gloves, with white studs on each of the knuckles. Compared to the other uniforms he had seen, this one was quite tasteful.

The sunlight gleamed off of the three, silver stars on the right shoulder, catching Akio's attention more than anything else.

"What the hell is this?" Akio growled and stood. "Are you trying to bribe me into helping you?"

"I do not bribe, Takahiro," Satsuki replied dangerously. "I am only giving you what you've always wanted, but have been too afraid to seek."

"You think this is what I want?!" Akio shouted and threw his hands at the Three Star uniform. "A Goku uniform?"

"No. Like every other human in this world, you want power. The power to make your ideals become a reality, the power to change

things. The power to protect those you love. I am offering you such a power."

Akio ground his teeth, but didn't say anything else.

She wasn't wrong. She knew it and he knew it.

"Will you finally live up to your full potential?" Satsuki asked, crossing her legs. "Or will you continue to live in squalor and degrade yourself even more?"

Akio bit his lip and looked back and forth between Satsuki and the offered Goku uniform, eventually shaking his head in indecision.

"Let... let me think about it."

"You have five days time," Satsuki nodded. "Choose wisely."

Akio took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then walked towards the door he had entered, leaving Satsuki and the offered Three Star uniform in the dust.

With Akio gone, Soroi walked over to Satsuki, teapot in hand.

"Would you care for another cup of tea, milady?"

"Please," She replied, holding her cup out.

"I wonder if he'll take it?" Iori pondered aloud as he inspected his handiwork in its cabinet.

Satsuki closed her eyes and took a sip of her tea, not bothering to answer her Sewing Club president's question.

After all, what would be the point in answering the obvious?

When Akio returned to the Mankanshoku residence, it was mid-afternoon, and class had been over for a few hours. Of course, he

didn't realize this, as his mind was preoccupied with other things. Namely the conversation he had had only an hour before.

Walking into the Mankanshoku dining room, Akio was greeted by none other than Mataro and Guts.

"Hey there, boss man," Mataro greeted, lazily flipping through a magazine as Guts slumbered on his lap. "How's it hanging?"

"Fine," Akio answered shortly and looked around. "Where is everyone?"

"Mom's cooking, Dad's taking a nap, and Sis and Ryuko are talking to some geek."

Akio rose an eyebrow at that.

"Some geek?"

"Yeah," Mataro nodded, flipping the page of his magazine. "Said he was with the newspaper or some shit."

"Alright, well, I'll go check it out," Akio said as he walked to his room, turning his head back and grinning at the young delinquent. "And you better watch your language young man."

"Oh, so I can browse Playboys no problem, but when I say 'shit' it's suddenly a crime?!" Mataro cried after him. "It's unfair, I tell you!"

"Too bad, so sad!" Akio called back, chuckling as he walked out of sight.

Letting out a deep sigh and walking in front of the bedroom door, Akio leaned against the wall next to it, turning his head up at the ceiling. He could faintly hear the sounds of some conversation taking place between Ryuko and Mako in the next room, but no 'geek' was involved as far as he could tell. They must have still been in the introductory phase.

Akio stared listlessly at the ceiling above as he spaced out, his mind running at a mile a minute once again now that he had left the dining room.

Just what was he going to do?

There was only two choices, and yet, it felt like there were hundreds.

He could go with his heart and join Satsuki, or he could go with his gut and sit this one out. Each choice had merit, and each one had its downfalls.

If he accepted Satsuki's offer, he could do exactly what she told him he would; he could change things. He could actually make a difference in this dog-eat-dog world, which is what he secretly wanted all along. He could paint his own picture on this blank canvas. And of course, if he did accept Satsuki's offer, he could warn the Takahiros of the upcoming conflict in person.

"I guess I could call them..." Akio mumbled to himself and pulled out his phone. He had to warn his parents about the upcoming invasion no matter what he decided. Maybe they'd be able to evacuate before things got too bad? Or take the necessary precautions? He wouldn't be able to live with himself if something bad happened to Akiko.

The repeating of a beeping sound echoed in Akio's ear.

No luck. No connection whatsoever. Osaka's reception must have been down.

Akio growled and slapped his phone shut, shoving it back in his pocket. It looked like he'd have to use a payphone.

Then again, if he was able to warn his parents of Satsuki's plan, what business did he have in Osaka, other than trying to prevent unnecessary conflict? Sure, he'd get a Goku uniform, but would it really be worth it to side with someone he resented only a week

ago? Honestly, Akio had no clue on what to think about Satsuki anymore. The jury was still out on her.

How would Ryuko react to all of this? Not well, he assumed. He deeply respected her opinion, almost more than his own brother. While she was occasionally a hot-blooded fool, she was a great judge of character, even if she didn't know that she had such a talent.

Akio pushed the thoughts from his head.

Before any important decisions, he had other things to attend to.

Sliding open the bedroom door, Akio stepped inside.

Ryuko and Mako sat beside each other, both of them reading a newspaper. To be honest, Akio didn't think either one of them would know what a newspaper was.

An unknown man sat across from them, clearly a student given his familiar uniform. He angrily drank from his tea, then slammed the cup back into the ground as if it had insulted him in some way. His somewhat jumpy personality was interesting to Akio, but he couldn't say it was the strangest thing he's ever seen.

None of them had noticed his entrance, so Akio opted it was best to keep it that way.

Leaning against the door frame, Akio crossed his arms and watched curiously as the three talked.

He noticed that the door beside him slid open slightly, revealing the faces of the rest of the Mankanshoku family. It seemed that he wouldn't be the only observer in this conversation.

"And what have we here?" Mako mused as she read the fine print. "It says 'We Are Not blankety-blank's blanks!' Wow, there's all sorts of incomprehensible stuff written in here, Ryuko!"

"Read the kanji, too!" The boy exclaimed. "Satsuki Kiryuin and the Kiryuin Conglomerate are trying to turn the academy's students into soldiers."

Akio flinched, taken off guard by the boy's statement. How did he know that?

The teen threw his tea back, then slammed the cup into the tea tray.

"I couldn't let that happen," The student continued, rather enthusiastic with his motions. "But the school paper was objected to by the Disciplinary Committee censor, and I was unable to distribute it to the students! It drove home just how powerless I truly am!"

"Nagita says he's gotten on the Student Council's bad side," Mako explained. "And has been banned from school grounds ever since!"

Akio narrowed his eyes at that. He felt that he knew the student body pretty well given his time with Nudist Beach, and never once had he heard of someone with the name of Nagita, nor had he heard of any censor of the school newspaper. To be fair, however, Akio had never read the school's newspapers, but he felt like he would have at least heard about it once or twice from the gossips of the school.

"There is no freedom of speech in this school," Nagita grumbled. "There isn't a single person who stands up to Kiryuin... Or so I thought."

Nagita turned his head up to Ryuko, his eyes gleaming with admiration and hope.

"You're different! You defeated the Elite Four all by yourself and struck fear into even Satsuki Kiryuin!"

Nagita stomped his foot on the ground, growing more and more passionate with each passing word.

"You're the revolutionary of Honnouji Academy! I can fight, too! If only you lead the way!"

Mako and Nagita both stared expectantly at Ryuko, waiting on her to say something.

"... Get out."

"Huh?"

"I'm not fighting because I want to," Ryuko turned her head down, her bangs covering her eyes. "Go home! Beat it!"

Nagita jumped up, knocking over the tea tray in the process.

"Then what are you fighting for?!"

"That's enough."

All three heads turned to where Akio was standing, only now noticing his presence.

Akio pushed himself off of the wall and walked over to Nagita, grabbing him forcefully by the shoulder and ushering him out.

"There is one man who saw what you have done and took back his life!" Nagita cried at her over his shoulder as he was lead away.

"Your fight hasn't been for nothing! So put on that sailor uniform and fight one more time!"

"She said to leave," Akio growled and pushed him to the front door. "So go!"

With one last shove, Akio pushed him out the open front door and onto the dirt.

"I won't let the courage you gave me go to waste!" Nagita called to Ryuko as Akio slammed the door shut.

The window to the right of it slid open, and Nagita popped his head in once more.

"I won't give up, Mato! You are Honnouji Academy's virtuous star of hope!"

Before Akio could slam the window on his neck, Nagita pulled his head out and ran off.

"I'll be back! Farewell!"

Akio let out an exasperated sigh and slammed the window shut with authority.

"Who the hell was that?" He asked as he turned to face the crowd behind him.

"Shinjiro Nagita," Mako answered. "He said he was a former member of the newspaper club, but he got kicked out because he was trying to stand up to Lady Satsuki."

"Bullshit," Akio mumbled under his breath. He *knew* he would have heard something about that.

"Whatever," Ryuko sighed and walked back to her room, done with the whole situation.

The Mankanshokus all watched her leave, then turned to Akio to give him a very pointed look.

"What?" Akio rose an eyebrow at their stares.

"You're the only one she actually talks to nowadays," Mako replied glumly, turning her head down and kicking at the floor board. It was obvious that she was a bit hurt that Ryuko had opened up to him and not her, even if she would never say it. "So you should go make sure she's alright, for the both of us."

"Hey now," Akio said and placed his hand on her shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. "She loves you just as much as anyone, if not more so."

"Yeah, I know," Mako smiled and waved it off. "It's just different with you, I should know that."

Akio blinked. "Different how?"

Mako and her mother both stared dumbfounded at Akio, while her father and Mataro picked lent out of their belly buttons, completely oblivious to the rather gossipy turn the conversation had taken.

"You don't see it?" Mrs. Mankanshoku asked slowly.

Akio shook his head and shrugged, having no clue where she was going with this.

"The way she looks at you?" Mako added on. "Even I've noticed, and I hardly pay attention to anything."

"Oh... *oooh*," Akio nodded, realization quickly dawning on him. Shaking that idea out of his head, he continued. "Come on now, this really isn't the time to be discussing such a thing, you two should both know that."

He almost felt bad for scolding them, considering they weren't really doing anything wrong, but Akio *really* did not want to continue down this line of conversation. At least not right now, not with everything that has been going on.

"You're the one that brought it up," Mako countered before breaking out into a huge grin with stars in her eyes. "Besides, wouldn't it be-"

Mrs. Mankanshoku placed her hand over Mako's mouth, all the while smiling sweetly at Akio.

"No, you're right Akio. We're sorry. Why don't you go check up on her, and we'll call you when dinner's ready?"

"Sure thing," Akio said, letting out a relieved smile. "I appreciate that."

Walking over to his room, he slid open the door, making sure to close it once he stepped inside.

The room was the same as always. His stuff was in one side of the room, and Ryuko's on the other.

Ryuko was lying in her sleeping bag facing the wall, with her blankets up to her shoulder. Senketsu hung on the dresser in front of her, his eye ever watching of his partner.

It was times like these he wish he could hear Senketsu like Ryuko could. Ever since that day with Tsumugu, Akio had always been curious as to what Senketsu had to say, or hell, even sounded like. It was obvious that him and Ryuko talked a lot, but Akio could never hear Senketsu's replies. He assumed the Kamui was a voice of reason to Ryuko, as well as a staunch ally and friend.

"Hey, Akio," Ryuko greeted without turning to face him.

"Ryuko," Akio greeted back and sat down on his mat, then nodded to Senketsu. "Senketsu."

The Kamui blinked at him, and that was all the reaction Akio could get, sadly. For some reason a small part of him thought he'd be able to hear him this time.

"Are you going to join us for dinner tonight?" Akio asked, not expecting an answer.

"Hmmm," Was all Ryuko said back.

Akio sighed and nodded, expecting that.

Rolling his neck, Akio turned his head back up to the ceiling, just staring absently at the tiles above.

What to do, what to do.

First things first. Taking out his phone, he punched in his brother's number and typed out a text message.

*Look up someone by the name of Shinjiro Nagita for me, will you?
Tell me what you find.*

Pressing send and snapping his phone shut, he went back to what he was doing before. Thinking.

Alone with his thoughts for the time being, Akio thought back to what Mako and Mrs. Mankanshoku had only said seconds before, and turned his gaze back to Ryuko.

Pursing his lips, Akio thought long and hard. *Was there a change in their relationship?* Those two certainly seemed to think so, and now that he thought about the facts, it certainly seemed that way on both ends. The moment the two had shared earlier today was certainly intimate, especially for two people such as themselves. That wasn't exactly a "friend" moment, so to speak.

He'd be lying if he said it was something he didn't want, but Akio wouldn't be so dense to act on that; at least not now. Ryuko needed a friend to talk to, not someone to put the moves on her.

It was amazing to think how much had changed in the span of a few months. It felt like only yesterday that he was still operating in the background, organizing her living with the Mankanshokus and her meeting with Senketsu. If this situation had happened back then, he wouldn't even be having this dilemma with himself, and that made him think. Was he the one who changed, or it was just his way of thinking that did? The Akio back then would have drained Ryuko and Senketsu dry if it meant beating the Kiryuins. Now, he realized that their well-being meant more to him than stopping Satsuki Kiryuin, who Akio didn't even think was all that evil anymore.

The Akio back then would probably call that being weak, but as of now, he could care less.

"Hmmm," Akio hummed to himself and glanced over at Senketsu.

Senketsu was once again staring at him, as if he were pleading with him to try again to get her out of this funk. He could only imagine how he was feeling, given the fact that he and Ryuko were basically two halves of a greater whole. Senketsu was created solely for her, and now, she wouldn't even put him on. It must have been crushing him.

Akio wanted to tell him that it was better to just wait at this point, but then a light bulb went off in his head.

Oh, he could get her to wear him again, but all thanks would have to go to Mako and Mrs. Mankanshoku for giving him the idea. It'd probably help everyone out, actually.

"Hey, Ryuko."

"What?"

"Wanna go grab a beer?"

There was a brief silence and Ryuko sat up in her sleeping mat, giving Akio a blank stare.

"Right now?"

"Yeah," Akio nodded and rose to his feet. "It'll be fun, and besides, it looks like you could use a drink."

"Well..." Ryuko murmured and tilted her head to the ground, fumbling around with what to answer.

"It's on me."

"Well, alright then," Ryuko said with a little more energy and rose to her feet as well. "Let's go."

Akio rose an eyebrow, slowly looking Ryuko up and down with a scrutinizing gaze.

"Really? In that? And not even a bath first?"

"The bath part I understand, but what's wrong with this?" Ryuko asked and pulled at her orange bunny pajamas.

"Ryuko... they're pajamas."

"But-"

"Pajamas, Ryuko," Akio huffed and tapped his foot impatiently on the ground. "What's wrong with Senketsu? Just wear him."

"I-I don't know," Ryuko stammered and rubbed at her arm sheepishly. "I mean, we're just going out. There's no need to bring Senketsu along with us."

"That's right, there really isn't anything to worry about," Akio agreed. "So go take a bath and put him on."

Ryuko looked like she was ready to object, but what Akio could only assume was a quick interjection from Senketsu made her change her mind.

"Fine," Ryuko breathed and walked out of the room, grabbing a spare couple of towels on the way out.

Akio waited till she had shut the door behind her and her footsteps had petered out down the hallway before laughing victoriously and mentally patting himself on the back. He was never known for his silver tongue, but it seemed that his persuasive skills had gotten a tad bit better.

Walking over to where Senketsu was hanging, Akio rubbed some of the dust off of his collar and straightened out some of the stray wrinkles.

"I got your back, buddy," Akio grinned.

Senketsu didn't say anything, only blinking a few times out of surprise at Akio's choice of words.

"You know, it's funny really," Akio continued, taking the expected silence as his cue to go on. "You know what I thought when I first heard about you?"

Senketsu blinked once and his top twisted back and forth, so Akio assumed that must have meant a no.

"I thought to myself 'Damn, he'll make an excellent weapon.'"

Senketsu's eye narrowed and turned to the ground, clearly distraught by Akio's words.

"But now, I think of you as a friend, even if I can't hear a word you say. Ryuko made me realize not to judge a book by its cover, as crazy as that sounds considering she does the exact opposite," Akio chuckled and shook his head, patting Senketsu on the collar once more, causing Senketsu to look back up at the man. "I've learned a lot about myself lately, and I can't help but think you played a great part in that. If it wasn't for your strength, I probably wouldn't even be here now, and neither would Ryuko."

Senketsu blinked several more times.

"So, thank you. I know you have Ryuko, but please, count me as a friend as well."

It might have been the wind from the open window, some whacky coincidence, or it might have even been him himself, but Senketsu's arm floated upwards and rested on Akio's shoulder.

The two stared directly at each other, both having a better understanding of one another. They may have been astronomically different, but in that moment, they both understood each other perfectly, even if they would never be able to communicate.

About twenty minutes later, and surprisingly no fuss from Ryuko, the two left the Mankanshokus, Akio leading her to the bar he and Aikuro often frequented.

The sky was completely clear, not a cloud blocking the sun's rays, but the air was beginning to cool as the seasons began to change.

Akio inhaled, enjoying the taste of fresh air on the back of his throat. The past two days had been absolutely insane for the two of them, but now that he had some time to unwind, he could tell he needed it just as much as Ryuko.

Speaking of Ryuko, Akio glanced over at her as they walked, hoping to gauge how she was doing.

Her eyes were darting to and fro as they walked, as if she were fully expecting someone to jump out of the shadows to attack her. She would occasionally reach down and grab at her top, pulling on it and stretching it out, as if the feel of Senketsu's fabric was uncomfortable on her skin. From the quick changes of emotions on her face, it was clear that Senketsu was saying something, but as to what, Akio obviously had no clue.

Crash!

Ryuko nearly jumped out of her skin and spun to the side, her hand already on her the holster for her collapsed scissor blade.

A random woman had dropped what looked to be a potted plant, and bent over to pick up the shards and dirt of the pot she had dropped. Feeling Ryuko's eyes on her, she looked up and smiled apologetically at the two.

"Sorry about that, it just kinda slipped out of my hand," The woman explained, rubbing at the back of her head.

Ryuko took several deep breaths and shook her head, walking off and leaving Akio behind.

"No worries, ma'am," Akio replied and raced off to catch his friend.

Akio fell into step beside her, but Ryuko didn't seem to notice or just didn't care. She could feel Akio's eyes on her, but for the life of her she couldn't make herself meet his gaze.

"Are you alright?" Akio asked hesitantly. "We don't have to do this, you know. We can just go back."

"I'm not a child that needs to be babied," Ryuko growled, still not meeting his eyes. "I think I can handle a simple walk."

"Of course."

The two continued to walk in silence, but Akio could still tell that Ryuko was still rather uncomfortable. At every slight noise in the distance she fidgeted, and at this point her face was all but pale.

"Here," Akio said and reached out to grab her hand, leading her around a corner. "It's this way."

Even though they had rounded the corner, Akio didn't relinquish his hold on her hand. Instead, he parted her clammy fingers with his own and interlaced his hand with hers. Ryuko didn't say anything to his action, but he could feel her grip tighten around his hand as they walked, and a little color had made its way back to her cheeks. The slight smile that graced her lips told Akio he made the right call.

"So, where is this place?"

"It's just down the street now," Akio answered. "It's a place me and my brother frequent when we have the time."

Ryuko nodded and glanced around at the buildings nearby, trying to spot it.

Eventually the two of them made it to the end of the block, and to the bar Akio had in mind.

There was another reason Akio wanted to come here at this moment. At this hour, there'd be no one there except for the unemployed or people down on their luck. Now, Akio was never a big fan of the bar crowd, so that's exactly why the early to mid afternoon was his preferred time for hitting this particular bar up. It wasn't exactly very popular to begin with, and depressed people didn't come to a bar to talk or make a ruckus. They just came to drink, which made it an ideal spot to grab a beer. He really didn't want to have to deal with rowdy drunks or people downing shots and causing a scene.

The two walked inside, and Akio led Ryuko to the corner of the bar, both of them plopping down on some bar stools in front of the bar counter. As he expected, the bar was pretty much empty. There was the occasional sad looking man drowning his sorrows out with booze, as well as some regulars.

"Hey, Lou," Akio greeted the familiar barman as he sat down

It was the same guy that always manned the bar when Aikuro and Akio came in; a nice old man by the name of Lou. Lou hailed from Scotland, and couldn't be any older than forty something, but he didn't look a day older than thirty. He had a big, bushy gray beard to counteract his bald head, but his face was surprisingly youthful, given his age and gray hair.

"Good afternoon, Akio," The barman greeted with a grin. "Can't say I was expecting to see you here today."

"Every day is a good day for a beer," Akio replied with a grin of his own. "You should know that."

Lou laughed and his eyes drifted from Akio to Ryuko, his eyebrows raising in curiosity at the sight of the unknown girl.

"Aye, and who's the lass? I don't think I've had the pleasure."

"This is-"

"Ryuko," She finished for him, giving a nod to the bartender.

"And so you are," Lou said and rested his hands on the countertop, leaning towards the two. "So what can I get you two today?"

"Two beers."

The bartender nodded and grabbed two glasses, pouring their beer and then handing one to each of them. That's another reason Akio loved this place. It was actually illegal for those under the age of twenty to drink in Japan, but Lou was pretty lenient with that law in his bar. Frankly, he needed the money, and he wouldn't turn down anyone that came into his establishment looking to buy a cold one; that is, unless you caused trouble. This place had avoided Satsuki's watch for awhile now, and Lou wanted to keep it that way.

"Thanks."

Lou nodded again and walked off to go help his other customers.

"So," Ryuko began and took a sip of her drink. "I take it you come here often?"

"Hmmm," Akio hummed as he took a long gulp. "Yeah, sometimes."

"It's, uh..." Ryuko hesitated and glanced around. "Nice?"

Akio snorted. "Yeah, it's not the cleanest place on earth, but it's the best place in town, and Kiryuin doesn't have any eyes down here."

"Really?"

"Really," Akio nodded. "Which makes it the best bar in town."

"Damn straight."

Ryuko took a sip of her beer, letting out a soft moan as the cooled beverage touched her tongue.

"I take it you're a big beer fan," Akio smirked.

"Oh, I love it," Ryuko smiled absently as she stared at the glass in front of her. "When I had the money I'd try and get someone to buy some for me, or I'd just plain steal 'em."

"That's funny," Akio chuckled and poked her stomach. "Because you certainly don't have a beer belly. At least not that I've seen."

Ryuko slapped his hand and glared at him, but the slight blush that tinged her cheeks made it less threatening.

Akio leaned back in his seat and laughed, motioning over to Lou again.

"Screw it, bring us some scotch too, would you Lou?"

The bartender grinned and nodded, bringing over a bottle of the amber liquid and two glasses.

"Scotch?" Ryuko rose an eyebrow and watched as Akio poured them both a glass.

"Yep, this here is my drink of choice whenever I can afford it," Akio replied and passed her a glass of the brown liquid. "But, for the love of god, just sip it. I'm not looking to get wasted and have to carry you back tonight."

"I can probably hold my liquor better than you, dick," Ryuko grumbled and took a sip, nearly gagging when she swallowed it.

"Good god!" Ryuko gasped and put the drink down, pushing it far away from her. "What the fuck was that? It tastes like hell!"

"I guess it *is* an acquired taste," Akio smirked and took a sip of his own, clicking his tongue and letting out a sigh of contentment.

"Wait a second," Ryuko frowned and narrowed her eyes at him. "How can you pay for all of this stuff? You live in the slums, too."

"That I do," Akio nodded. "But, I used to get pretty big paychecks from the backers of Nudist Beach for my work, so I'm pretty well off."

"Really now? Why's that?"

"Well, undercover work isn't exactly the safest line of work around," Akio shrugged. "I didn't get paid often though, but when I did, it had gone through so many different names and accounts it would probably have been a few months since my previous one."

Akio took a sip of his drink and glanced over at Ryuko, who was staring at him with a perplexed look on her face.

"So it's harder to track," He clarified.

"Ah," Ryuko nodded and took a drink of her beer.

"But, what about you?"

"What about me?" Ryuko raised an eyebrow.

"I really don't know all that much about you," Akio explained.

"Oh," Ryuko blinked. "Well, what do you want to know?"

Akio pursed his lips in thought, pushing himself further up on his barstool, when he felt the familiar feeling of paper in his pocket crinkling against his skin. Pushing his hand into his pocket, he felt the picture that Akiko had given him on his fingertips, giving him the perfect idea on what to talk about.

Turning his head to Ryuko, his green eyes met her blue ones.

"Let's start with the basics: what's your favorite color?"

"Green," Ryuko answered, brushing the red strand of hair out of her eyes. "You?"

"Red. Favorite food?"

"Mako's mom's cooking," Ryuko smiled and turned in her seat to face him. "Favorite movie?"

"Pulp Fiction. You?"

"Kill Bill."

Akio threw his head back and laughed, nearly causing his beer to come out of his nose.

"What?" Ryuko asked, slightly offended.

"You *would* love that movie."

"What's not to like? It's about a total babe who kicks a lot of ass. Sign me the fuck up."

"Alright then, Kill Bill it is. What's your favorite book?"

Ryuko just looked at him like he asked what her favorite type of grass was, not answering the question.

"Oh, excuse me for liking to read," Akio rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, because you're a nerd."

"A nerd who likes to dance, mind you," Akio pointed out. "Don't forget that part."

"Oh, god, how could I?" Ryuko chuckled. "Does that mean you like to dance while you read? You know, in a little pink tutu and a pair of thick rimmed glasses?"

"Nah, that'd be too hard. I can only sing opera when I dance around. It just feels right, you know?"

Ryuko broke out into a fit of laughter, nearly falling off of her stool if Akio didn't stop her before she could.

Her laughter had proved contagious, as sure enough, even Akio started laughing.

Senketsu's eye went back and forth between the two, gleefully taking in the scene unfolding before him. If Senketsu had a set of lips, it'd be curved upwards into a great, big smile at seeing Akio joke with Ryuko like they used to, and his Ryuko feeling carefree and happy for the first time in two days.

It truly was a sight to behold.

Four days later...

Akio whistled to himself as he went about town, a giant bag of groceries in his right arm. Seeing that he didn't have anything to do today, he decided to help Mrs. Mankanshoku out and go grocery shopping for them, his treat. They could actually use something else other than 'mystery' ingredients in their croquettes this time, even if they were still pretty damn good.

Of course, the deadline that Satsuki had given him was quickly coming to an end, and Akio still had no clue on what he was going to decide. He hadn't been able to reach the Takahiros on a payphone, as the landlines were all down, too. That meant if he didn't go there in person, then they would have no way of knowing about the upcoming invasion of Osaka.

Then again, he still didn't know what to think of Satsuki. He knew he couldn't trust her, but a small part of him felt that he could. Even at her worst, Satsuki wasn't a liar. She was an honorable woman, and as strange as it felt to say, he highly doubted that she would stab him in the back with this assignment he was given. He *did* want to try and prevent unnecessary destruction, but part of him knew that no matter how hard he tried, things were going to go to hell very, very soon.

And then, there was the matter of that Goku uniform...

Flinching at the feeling of a vibration coming from his pocket, he placed his bag on the ground and pulled out his cell phone to see who was calling him.

"Aikuro?" Akio mumbled to himself and answered the call. "Hey, brother, what's up?"

"Nagita's information is gone!" Aikuro cried out immediately upon connecting. "It's been deleted!"

"What?!"

"Where are you now? Is Ryuko with-"

Akio had already slapped his phone shut and began sprinting to the Mankanshoku household, the bag of groceries all but forgotten.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Akio panted as he ran, his feet pounding on the ground as his heart thumped in his chest. The prior feeling of happiness was all but gone, replaced with that of a screaming anxiety and panic.

Nothing was certain yet, but Akio knew that something was terribly, terribly wrong. No one's information just gets deleted from the database like that.

How could he be so stupid? He was suspicious of that man from day one, why didn't he follow it further? How could he be so careless?

He pushed himself even harder, ducking into an alleyway that would lead directly behind Mako's house.

Oh, god. If Ryuko were to get hurt because of his stupidity... He could have just stayed with her... why didn't he stay with her? He didn't *have* to go get those groceries.

Hurdling the fence in their backyard, he ran up to Ryuko's window, slamming it open and sticking his head inside.

"Akio?!" Mrs. Mankanshoku exclaimed and looked up from where she was picking up Ryuko's pajamas.

"Where's Ryuko?!"

"She grabbed her sailor uniform and went out," Mrs. Mankanshoku blinked. "Why, is there something-"

BOOM!

An explosion echoed off in the distance, cutting off whatever Mrs. Mankanshoku was planning on saying.

"Oh my god," Akio breathed and pushed himself away from the window, running to wherever the sound had come from.

"Akio, wait!"

Akio didn't listen to the cry for him to hold up. He couldn't. His chest was burning with fear, fear that he was already too late.

Pulling his arm out of his sling and throwing it aside, Akio pressed down on the buttons of his gloves, releasing the blades from above his hands. He was in no condition to fight, but if push came to shove, he'd give it everything he had, or he'd go down swinging.

The signs of destruction became more and more apparent as he ran, only adding more tinder to the fear in his chest.

Rounding a corner, Akio skidded to a halt, his breath catching in his throat in a ragged gasp.

Smoke and dust drifted around listlessly down the road in front of him. Every building on the street had signs of destruction, and splotches of blood littered the dirt road.

"GAAAAAH!"

A bloodcurdling scream rang through the air, echoing over and over again in Akio's head. It wasn't just any scream. It was Ryuko's.

Snapping out of his stupor, Akio broke down the road like a bat out of hell, barely even watching to see where he was going.

Complete and utter silence. The only thing Akio could hear was his gasping breaths and his beating heart in his ears.

He could still feel her scream, though.

"Ryuko!" Akio called out as he ran, his head on a swivel as he tried to spot her. "Ryuko, answer me!"

Nothing.

He could feel himself start to break, but he couldn't stop yet. He wouldn't.

"Damn it, Ryuko," Akio mumbled as he skidded to a stop at the end of the street. "Where are you?"

Glancing around the street, he could see no sign of her. There was plenty of rubble and torn up dirt, but no Ryuko.

Just when he was ready to climb to higher ground, he spotted a leg leaning over the side of a shack beside him.

"Ryuko!"

Jumping up and scaling the shack, Akio ignored the burning pain in his left shoulder. Now wasn't time for such things.

With a grunt he pulled himself up and on to the roof, immediately wishing he hadn't.

"No, no, no," Akio whispered as he picked himself up sprinted over to his fallen friend.

There, lying unconscious on the ground, was Ryuko. Her face was scratched and bruised, her mouth agape as she slowly took in breath. A blanket covered her form, hiding everything from the neck down from view. Akio was so stupefied by the sight in front of him, that he didn't even stop to think who put it there, and why.

Falling to his knees, Akio absently brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and re-positioned her head so that her neck wasn't in such an awkward position. The touch of her skin calmed him down slightly, as it let him know that she was in fact still alive and still with him.

Gulping, Akio lifted the blanket to look beneath it, his worse fear being realized.

Ryuko was only in her underwear. There was no Senketsu.

Seeing something clutched in Ryuko's hand, Akio grabbed it with his own, slowly unraveling her fingers to reveal Senketsu's scarf.

Relief splashed over him like a bucket of cold water, but the feeling of dread, shame, and sadness still gnawed away at his chest.

"I'm so sorry," Akio said, his voice cracking. "I-I should have done better. I should have done better... I should have been stronger... smarter..."

He closed Ryuko's hand back around the cloth, making sure she had a strong grip on it. His hands then moved back to the blanket,

tucking its sides underneath her and swaddling her like a new born baby.

Putting his arms underneath her, he picked her up bridal style, and began to make his way back to Aikuro's apartment. He could grieve once he got Ryuko somewhere safe. Right now, he had to get out of here.

He told himself that, but with each step he took, he could feel Ryuko's breath against his chest, and feel the warmth of her body in his arms.

He felt the entire weight of her unconscious body push against his arms.

Never would he forget that burden. Never.

Kicking in the door to Aikuro's apartment, he carried Ryuko over to the couch, resting her gently on the surface.

Akio took a few steps back from the couch, but his eyes were still glued on to Ryuko.

A thousand thoughts raced through his head. Who did this to her, and why? It couldn't have been Nagita. There was no way in hell Ryuko would lose to some scrawny newspaper boy. It wouldn't have been Satsuki, either. She would have beaten the shit out of Ryuko, but he didn't think she would think to destroy Senketsu like this. After beating them, what would have been the point? Satsuki would have proven her strength and superiority.

That left only one person Akio could think of, and that scared him.

Akio bent down beside her, pressing his fingers to her neck to find her pulse. Her heart was still beating fast and strong, of course, but Akio had to feel it himself to make sure.

But, even with all of those thoughts racing through his mind, there was still one that prevailed over them all.

"Damn it..."

Akio started to pace back and forth across the room, running a hand through his hair as he chewed on his lip, every other second looking over at Ryuko, a single belief beating down on him.

"Damn it."

...

"Damn it."

Akio walked over to the open door, quietly stepping into the apartment complex's hallway and closing the door behind him as to not disturb her.

...

"DAMN IT!"

Akio turned on a dime and punched the wall behind him, leaving a fist sized dent in the crappy dry wall.

"DAMN IT!"

Akio turned on his heel, kicking a stray bucket across the hall, sending it through a window and breaking the glass.

"GOD!"

Akio fell to his knees, punching at the floor beneath him over and over again until he felt himself tire out.

It was *his* fault. If he didn't go shopping, he could have stayed with Ryuko, and told her not to go out. Hell, even if she did, he could have followed her. He could have helped her.

He let her down utterly and completely in every way imaginable.

Akio buried his head into his hands, feeling tears begin to fall from his eyes.

Yet, he knew that even if he was there to help her, he would have been absolutely *useless* . If it really was Nui Harime that had done this to her, she would have killed Akio like it was nothing, or even worse, would have caused Ryuko to get hurt even more by protecting him.

Because he was weak.

In the end, he could have prevented nothing. The whole thing would have happened even if he was there, and that thought sickened him to his core. He failed Ryuko, and he failed Senketsu.

Because he was weak.

God, and to think that only days before he had told Senketsu that he had his back. That he was his friend. Disgusting. Who was he to promise such things.

He was weak, in more ways than one.

"Oh, god..."

Akio remembered the promise he had made to Ryuko, and that's what finally broke him.

Picking himself off of the ground and wiping the tears from his eyes, he walked back into the apartment and over to where Ryuko was.

This would never, *never*, happen again. That fever dream he had that night he fought with Iori will never come to fruition, not when he could do everything in his power to stop it.

"I won't fail you again, Ryuko," Akio whispered as he knelt down beside her. "I'll be there for you next time. I promise."

Kissing her forehead, Akio rose back to his full height.

He could do better, and he would do better.

"I'll see you soon."

Turning and walking back out the door, Akio headed to the one place that could make that promise a reality, that could give him the strength to make it become a reality.

Osaka.

And there you have it!

Like I said, it's pretty long, but I do hope you all enjoyed it.

Boy howdy, talk about a roller coaster of emotions this chapter! I felt really bad writing that whole bar scene when I knew what was coming up. Poor Senketsu, Akio and Ryuko.

Speaking of Akio, talk about a turn around. Just like every other human being in the world, he just wants to protect the people he loves, and if that means going back on what he once believed, then so be it. It was actually really interesting writing him this chapter, because I knew all along how I wanted it to go, and I knew what decision he would come to in the end. I imagine you all expected he would go to Osaka, too. But now, he has a bit more motivation to do so.

I also wanted to write some kind of Senketsu this chapter. Since this story is mostly told from Akio's eyes, we never really get to hear our favorite sailor uniform talk all that much. Well, to be fair, he didn't talk at all here, but he definitely had more of a presence. And dare I say, a budding friendship between him and Akio? Interesting. I wonder how that will work out between the two.

I hope the ending wasn't too sudden. I wanted it to happen in the blink of an eye, similar to the way it did in the anime. I also hope I played Akio's emotions well. Anger, sadness, regret, all of that good stuff. It was actually kinda fun having him blow up like that, since it was a first for him, really.

Well, anyhow, thanks for reading I guys! I really appreciate it!

Until next time!

The Calm Before the Storm

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before my Body is Dry!

I hope everyone likes this chapter! I'll be honest, this one is more of a "set up" chapter for the next one, but I still hope it'll be fun.

I also apologize about the somewhat long wait. I recently got caught up in the Fate Stay/Night VN, and finally finished UBW and am rushing through Heavens Feel right now. Damn, it is sooo good. This shit be poppin', yo.

And once again, thank you all for your continued support! I really appreciate it.

Now then, on with the show!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

Akio leaned against the military truck behind him, his arms crossed as he watched the Academy students load different supplies onto the trucks bound to Osaka. The wind was beginning to pick up, blowing through his hair and causing his new black jacket to billow in the wind. With the nearly all black Goku uniform, his stern face, and the three scars, he made quite the intimidating portrait.

After his talk with Satsuki, he found himself here to oversee the final preparations for their move out. The talk with Satsuki went as expected, given the two of them. Akio only said three words to her, and it sealed the deal.

"I'll do it."

Now, here he was. Very eventful.

Even so, he still didn't yell out any orders to his troops, because frankly, he didn't care. He didn't sign on with Satsuki to become one of her authoritarians who got their jollies off on ordering around those beneath them. He signed on for main two reasons: to get his family out of danger, and for the Goku uniform. He told himself that he would try his hardest to prevent Osaka from getting raised to the ground, but in his heart he already knew that would be near impossible. It'd be like trying to control the weather.

It wouldn't stop him from trying, however.

Glancing left and right, he had a weird feeling in his stomach knowing that he was currently standing besides the Elite Four, and he was technically the only one with a Three Star uniform at this time. He had never felt more like a fish out of water than he did right now.

The four's reactions to his immediate promotion were all very intriguing to Akio. All four of them didn't say a word against it, or a word against him. He knew that Nonon didn't like him, and the other three probably didn't care for him either, but they still didn't say a word about it. They were so loyal to their leader that they'd follow any order without complaint. It was impressive, really.

"We'll be shipping out in an hour."

Akio looked over to Gamagoori, who was addressing him more than the other three.

"If there's anything you want to do beforehand, you should go do that now."

Akio pushed himself off the truck, giving a nod of thanks to the man.

"You're right. Thanks."

Gamagoori returned the nod as Akio walked away, his Three Star Goku uniform billowing in the wind.

There was only one person he really needed to talk to before he left.

Akio stood outside his brother's door, his hand hovering over the door knob, indecision all over his face.

Sighing, he raised his hand and knocked instead. He didn't want to stay long. A part of him didn't want to see Ryuko right now, either. Not while wearing this. She'd obviously jump to conclusions before he could even get a word in edgewise. He only wanted to say goodbye to his brother before he left.

He could hear a bit of commotion coming from the other side of the door, and within seconds it opened, revealing the familiar face of Aikuro.

"Akio?" Aikuro blinked, his eyes looking him up and down. "Where have you been? I've been trying to call you for-"

Aikuro stopped mid-sentence, his eyes landing on the three silver stars on his shoulder.

"We should talk," Akio said and motioned with his head for his brother to come out.

Narrowing his eyes, Aikuro nodded and stepped out of the apartment, closing the door behind him.

"I take it you're going to explain to me what the hell you're doing in that."

"First things first," Akio deflected, nodding towards the closed door. "How is she?"

"She's all right. She's stirred a bit in her sleep, but other than that she's been out like a light," Aikuro replied quickly. "Now, on to the uniform, Akio."

"... It was given to me by Kiryuin when I agreed to lead the Osaka brigade," Akio answered with closed eyes. Might as well get on with it.

"Wait, what? Kiryuin? Leading a brigade? Where the hell did all of this come from?"

Just from his tone of voice, Akio could tell he was growing more and more confused, and in turn, more and more upset. At least he was giving him the time of day to explain himself.

"Before you say anything else, I am not joining her, nor am I sympathetic to her 'plight,'" Akio explained. "I'm doing this for my own reasons. They are using me just as I am using them."

"Fine," Aikuro shrugged and rolled his eyes. "Get on with it, because where I'm standing from, it certainly *looks* like you quit Nudist Beach to join her side."

Akio opened his eyes, glaring daggers at his brother.

"Maybe you shouldn't take everything at face value, then," Akio replied dangerously before calming himself down. There was no reason to get upset, even if he was on edge. What happened to Ryuko wasn't Aikuro's fault, and neither was anything else. "I agreed to help her in exchange for this uniform, as well as getting a chance to go to Osaka."

"Start with the Osaka part. That doesn't make any sense, why would you have to go-"

Aikuro stopped, realization dawning on him.

"That's right," Akio nodded. "As you already know, my parents and sister live in Osaka. I have to get them out of there."

"Wait, how did you know that?"

"They came to visit me last week. They told me everything."

"And you aren't angry with me?" Aikuro asked slowly. "Even though I had been secretly contacting them?"

"I have no reason to be," Akio sighed. "You were just trying to help me, as you always do."

Aikuro nodded, his confused and slightly angered expression slowly beginning to fizzle out.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"In a perfect world, I'd get them out of the city," Akio said with a frown. "I doubt it'd be possible, though. The roads will probably be blocked when everything goes to hell."

"What about our base?" Aikuro put forth. "They'd be safe there."

"They would," Akio agreed. "But, I just don't trust it. If Honnouji Academy is attacking Osaka, I'm worried that the base will be attacked or destroyed somehow."

"Damn," Aikuro cursed, biting his thumb. "That's true. I hadn't thought about it."

"Yeah, be wary of that. I don't know, maybe if they have a basement they can just hide out there. I think I'll still try and get them out of the city somehow."

"How? You just said that the roads would probably be cutoff."

"Maybe if I stole one of the transports..." Akio trailed off, his brow furrowed in thought.

"That could work," Aikuro agreed. "It'd probably be your best option, honestly. Osaka could very well be a battleground when all is said and done. Even a basement might not withstand what could occur."

Akio nodded, taking a step back and letting his back lean against the wall behind him. Things could never be easy.

"Alright, so we went over Osaka, but what about the Goku uniform?"

Akio looked back at his brother, his expression growing dark.

"I... I need it."

"What?" Aikuro's eyes narrowed. "And why would you need something like a Goku uniform?"

"You saw her, Aikuro," Akio replied, his fists tightening at his side. "She had the crap beat out of her, even with Senketsu. I could never hope to stand up to the monster that did this to her. Even if I was there with her, the results would be the same."

Running a hand through his hair, he shook his head, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"I refuse to be a burden to her."

Aikuro's eyes softened. Walking over to where he was standing, he leaned on the wall next to him.

"So, this is for Ryuko, then?"

"No... maybe... I don't know," Akio mumbled, and looked up to his brother with hopeless eyes. "What if it was you instead of her? Or one of the Mankanshokus? I couldn't stand the thought of one of you dying on me when there was something that I could have done to change it. Even if it means wearing some stupid article of clothing."

Aikuro nodded, his eyes drifting to the floor. Could he in all honesty tell his brother that he wouldn't do the same? That's one thing about

this type of power that was easy to forget: just because you might not like how the people in charge handle it, it doesn't mean that everyone in the world would use it poorly. Of all the people out there, he knew deep down that Akio wouldn't let this type of strength get to his head, or use it for his own personal gain.

Sighing, Aikuro looped his arm around his brother's shoulders, giving it a reassuring pat.

"That's a noble cause, little brother. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions like that."

"Thanks man. I just wish this dumb shit was all over and done with, you know?"

Aikuro was going to respond, but stopped when he heard a rattling sound coming from inside his apartment.

Both he and Akio shared a look, but before either could do anything, the door opened, revealing one Ryuko with a blanket wrapped around her and Senketsu's scarf still clenched in her hand.

"Akio!" Ryuko's eyes brightened at seeing his familiar face, already moving towards him only to stop dead in her tracks when she caught sight of what he was wearing.

"What's with the new duds?" Ryuko asked, her eyes widening when she spotted the three stars on his shoulder and the cut in half Academy symbol down his chest. "Wait... What is this?"

Akio raised his hands out in front of him, hoping to stop Ryuko before she got the wrong idea. He could tell she was already connecting the dots in a way that would prove quite harmful.

"Now, let me explain before you jump to conclusions. I've only agreed to help Satsuki just this once so I-

"Jump to conclusions?" Ryuko interrupted, her teeth grinding audibly from her mouth. "There isn't much to jump to, is there? You just said it."

Seeing where this was leading to, Aikuro tried to jump in to defuse the situation.

"Ryuko, seriously-"

"No, no, no. You know what?" Ryuko laughed mockingly, the hurt and anger in her eyes clear as day. "I actually thought that I might wake up today and you'd be there watching over me just like always. I guess that was just stupid of me."

"Ryuko..." Akio's face dropped, his heart plunging into the pit of his stomach. "Please, you don't understand."

"What's there to understand?" Ryuko scoffed, pulling the blanket tighter around herself and taking a step away from him. "It's clear that you've decided to shack up with Kiryuin and her group of monkeys, even after all they've done. The Goku uniform is evident of that."

Akio turned his head down to avoid her piercing gaze, his bangs covering his eyes.

"I guess those promises you made me were just a load of shit," Ryuko said, putting the final nail in the coffin.

Akio flinched at her words, but didn't say anything more. What would be the point? She was right. There was no point in trying to deny it. She had every right to be angry after what Akio had told her that day. He promised he'd be there, and he wasn't. There wasn't anything else to say.

"I... I should get going."

Turning and walking towards the exit, Akio kept his head down as he walked to avoid their gaze, his face totally blank. Emotions or not, he had a mission to complete.

Aikuro and Ryuko watched him walk away until he was out of sight, then Aikuro turned his gaze to Ryuko, watching her with a mixture of disapproval and annoyance.

"What?" Ryuko growled, her eyes not leaving the exit that Akio had just taken. "You have something to say, so say it."

Aikuro only shook his head, walking back into his apartment to leave Ryuko with her thoughts and Senketsu in the barren hallway.

Hearing Senketsu sigh, Ryuko rolled her eyes and turned her head down to the scarf in her hand.

"Do you have something you want to say, too?"

Senketsu hummed and closed his eye before speaking, his words going heard by only her and her alone.

"Sometimes there's more going on beneath the surface that we cannot see, Ryuko. You shouldn't be so quick to judge."

"Thanks for the pointer," Ryuko grumbled, turning on her heel and walking back into Aikuro's apartment. "Let's just cut the philosophy and worry about getting you whole again, okay?"

Several hours later...

Akio sighed and rested his arm on the car door, his head resting in his hand. With his other hand he lazily gripped the steering wheel in front of him, following the long line of transports to Osaka. They were going so *slow*. If this was his gig, he'd be having them pushing sixty miles per hour at the least.

After an impassioned speech by none other than Satsuki herself, all platoons set out for their destinations, ready to bring victory to Honnouji Academy. Some more ready than others.

The orders were simple. Go to the assigned city and bring the president of that city's high school down to his knees. Now, Akio had no plans on being on the front line for this fight, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to try and get this over with as quickly as possible to avoid unnecessary injuries or destruction. If that meant drafting the perfect plan to bring Osaka's high school down, then so be it. It'd be better than stalling and letting this conflict blow up.

And of course, there was one of Akio's main problems. The student council president of Osaka's high school, Naniwa Kinman High School, was Kaneo Takarada. Kaneo Takarada was the heir to The Takarada Conglomerate, which stood second only to the Kiryuins in terms of wealth and power. The Takarada Conglomerate was actually one of Nudist Beach's biggest funders, and Kaneo himself was very loyal to the Nudist Beach cause, probably because he hated the Kiryuins just as much as they did, but for a different cause. If they were out of the way, the Takaradas would reign supreme.

Which is why Akio wanted to finish this fight as quickly as possible. Takarada was one rich son of a bitch. He wouldn't put it past the billionaire to use his money to do or buy dangerous things to use against the Honnouji forces. While Akio didn't exactly care for Satsuki Kiryuin or the Elite Four, the students were a different story. He'd rather they didn't seriously get hurt this day. Hell, some of them he even knew by name. Why they were this loyal to Satsuki, he'd never know. Their devotion was impressive, really.

Akio would have to be well thought out with his plans. Takarada was a wild card, and always had been. He could never get a good read on the man in all of the time he had known him. On some days he was the most despicable man on the face of the planet, and on others his devotion and loyalty to Nudist Beach was astounding.

He expected that his battle plan would be just as hard to predict.

Exhaling slowly as his eyes drifted back and forth between the clouds and the road, Akio's mind inevitably drifted to his run-in with Ryuko. He couldn't help but think maybe he handled it wrong. If he was just a little more assertive, he could have explained his side of things, so why didn't he? Maybe it was because he didn't want to push her too hard. After what she's been through, he really wasn't looking to get into an argument. But, then again, she wasn't a glass doll. She could have handled someone yelling back at her. Aikuro was able to see his side of things easily enough, so why didn't he trust Ryuko to be able to as well? Well, to be fair, she didn't exactly give him an opportunity to explain.

Regardless, he could have went about it with more tact.

... Hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Feeling someone watching him, Akio glanced to the right and to his supposed 'partner' in all of this.

Watching may have been the wrong choice of words.

"Is there something that you want, Sanageyama?"

"I've just been thinking, is all," Uzu said, obviously wanting to go somewhere with it.

"Yes?" Akio sighed.

"Why did you sign on for this?" Uzu asked bluntly. "Lady Satsuki was pretty assured that you would accept her deal, but I wasn't so sure."

"Let's just say I have some personal stakes in this," Akio answered lightly. "This shaky alignment is just a stepping stone to accomplish what I've set out for."

And then, Uzu did what he least expected. He snorted.

"Is something funny about that?" Akio growled and turned to look at him, but still keeping an eye on the road in front of him.

"That was a very Lady Satsuki thing to say, you know," Uzu said with a shrug, still grinning. "I just find it interesting how similar you two can be, even though your actions claim that you want nothing but to be the opposite."

Akio's grip tightened on the steering wheel, but he bit his tongue to stop himself from saying anything too rash.

"We'll see about that at the day's end," Akio replied dangerously.

"Yes," Uzu answered, leaning his head back in his seat. "I suppose we will. How're you liking your new uniform, by the way?"

Akio glanced over at him, raising an eyebrow. Was he trying to engage him in friendly conversation? It was as if all of the hostility Uzu had been shooting his way had evaporated in a second.

"It's fine. It's really warm and itchy, though."

"Goku uniforms tend to be that way. I'm guessing it's because of the Life Fibers."

Akio nodded. That made sense, he supposed. That'd be more in line with Inumuta's ball park, though, which prompted his next thought.

"... Are they really as strong as everyone makes them out to be?" Akio asked hesitantly.

"Even more so," Uzu replied with a nod. "They'll get you to places that you never even dreamed of."

Akio hummed, but didn't reply, electing to keep his attention to the truck in front of him.

"You know, I was just like you when I first came here," Uzu continued after a moment of silence. "The disdain for the Goku uniforms, I mean."

"Really?"

"Yep. I thought it'd be like the equivalent of taking steroids or some other performance enhancing drug."

"So what changed?"

"I realized that if I want to be the strongest, I had to accept that this was the way to do it," Uzu replied nonchalantly. "I mean, just look around us, Takahiro. Matoi, Lady Satsuki, that bitch Harime. How could people like you and me ever hope to stand up to forces of nature like that?"

Akio stared dumbly at Uzu, nearly forgetting that he was the one driving. It was like he had just taken the words out of his mouth, even if his reasoning was vastly different than Akio's. While Akio fought for the people he loved, Uzu fought because he wanted to be the strongest out there. While it was a noble cause, Akio just couldn't agree with it.

"Besides, if someone as strong as Lady Satsuki chose to enhance her strength by wearing a Kamui, I can't be in that bad of company, right?"

Shaking his head, Akio rid himself of his stupor.

"A valid point," He conceded. "You know, for someone who has the nickname of 'monkey,' you sure are insightful."

Uzu snorted, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment, No Star trash," Uzu replied jokingly. There was surprisingly no hint of mocking in his tone.

"That doesn't seem as fitting now, does it?" Akio chuckled as well. "After all, I'm the one wearing the Three Star. Wouldn't that make me your superior?"

"In your dreams, maybe."

Akio laughed, probably for the first time that day. It was in that moment that he realized that if things were different, Uzu could very well be his friend. It was sad to think that things *had* to be different for that to actually occur.

Calming down, Uzu settled back in his seat and crossed his arms.

"How much longer until we're there?"

"We're here now, actually," Akio said as he spotted the exit ramp to Osaka and turned on to it. The sight of the Osaka skyline was clearly visible in the distance, and would hopefully still be visible once all was said and done.

"Good. It's about time we got this show on the road."

Akio remained silent, only following the convoy in front of him. Frankly, a part of him really didn't want to go through with this, but a larger part of him told him he had to. All he had to do was strategize and nothing more.

Actually, now that he thought about it, he could probably just bolt the minute they got there. After all, he had gotten what he had wanted, what was the point in staying? He got his uniform, and his free trip to Osaka. Why did he even have to stick around?

Well, that part was obvious. He *had* to do this. Someone else could get it wrong. Someone else would be much more ruthless than he. If he was the one organizing things, then he could at least do it his way. The way that caused the least amount of carnage as possible.

It was probably why Satsuki picked him in the first place. She knew he wouldn't leave at the first chance.

Akio bit his lip, his hand tightening around the steering wheel. Was he really that see-through? Maybe if he was more cutthroat, things would be easier. In fact, they probably would be. But, that just wasn't him.

The line of trucks in front of his slowly came to a stop on the outskirts of the city, just as Akio had told them to. The skyscrapers and other buildings towered in the distance, and small shops and businesses were beginning to pop up here and there, but they had yet to reach the interior of the city.

Akio took a deep breath, steeling his nerves. To get through this day, he'd have to forget about everything else. Ryuko, Aikuro, his own ideals, everything. He couldn't think about how many lives he might have saved with his plan, or how many lives he might have ruined. He could only look at the bigger picture, and hope that his choices would be the right ones.

It was now or never.

"Let's go," Akio said and hopped out of the truck, quickly followed by Uzu.

"Why are we doing this again?" Uzu asked with discontent as he followed Akio to the back of their truck.

"Unlike your comrades, I refuse to go into this without a plan other than beating them up," Akio answered as he stopped at the back, banging his hand on the truck's steel frame. "All of you, out! Double time!"

The Honnouji students hopped out of the truck in a single file line, all lining up beside Akio and standing at attention. There were about forty students in total, but Akio doubted he'd need that many.

"You," He began and pointed to the first student in line. "Get me two maps and a marker."

The student nodded and ran off, running to the front of the convoy.

"And you three can relay my orders to the convoy leader once all is said and done, " Akio continued, pointing to the next three in line.

The students nodded, their arms still snapped in attention.

"Yes sir!" One, more feminine voice, answered.

Wait.

Snapping his head to the voice, Akio's jaw dropped.

"Mako?!"

"That's me sir!" Mako barked, her hand still on her forehead. "Mako Mankanshoku, at your service!"

"W-what the hell are you doing here? And drop the 'sir' crap!"

"Yes sir- I mean, sure thing Akio," Mako smiled and dropped her arm, her demeanor changing at the drop of a hat.

The rest of the students glared at the No Star as if she had just personally insulted them by dropping her salute. Uzu only listened halfheartedly as he turned his head back and forth, probably trying to pick up the different smells and sounds of Osaka.

"Why are you here, Mako?" Akio repeated.

"Um... I'm not entirely sure?" Mako grinned sheepishly and rubbed the back of her head. "I kinda just went with the flow."

"Just went with the..." Akio trailed off and shook his head, pursing his lips to keep from cursing outright. "Alrighty, then. From now on, you're with me. I don't want you leaving my sight, understood?"

"Yes sir!"

Akio rolled his eyes as Mako trotted over to him, coming to a stop behind him with her hands clasped behind her back, trying her best to look intimidating and failing miserably.

The student Akio had sent out to fetch his supplies returned shortly, handing Akio the map and marker and giving him another salute.

"Here you are, sir!"

"Thank you," Akio nodded as he accepted them, then walked over to the back of the truck and placed the map down on its surface. "Stay next to me and watch so you know what to tell the others."

The student nodded and stood next to Akio as he unfurled the map on the truck floor.

"Sanageyama, come here."

Uzu did as he was told and stood on the other side of Akio, but as he couldn't exactly see the map, he could only listen to what he had to say.

"Alright, first we'll decide on what route to take."

"Why would that matter?" Uzu asked curiously.

"Simple," Akio said and pointed to a bridge in the center of the map. "If we continue down this road, we'll eventually reach one of the biggest bridges in Osaka, and then we'll be right out in front of the high school. We *cannot* go this way."

"Why's that?"

"I'm quite familiar with the student council president, Takarada. My guess, and this is only a guess, is that he has set explosives on the major bridges of Osaka, rigged to explode when our trucks even touch them. This is also the main road of Osaka, so it'll be way to obvious that we'd take it."

"That *would* be detrimental..." Uzu conceded, tapping his chin with his finger. "But, we've cut off their information network? How would he know?"

"Oh, he'll know. And since he knows, Takarada wouldn't hesitate to do something so radical such as blowing up a bridge. He has the money to rebuild them a thousand times over. I won't take that chance, even if it's far out there."

Uncapping his marker, Akio drew a line looping around the water way that cut through the center of town.

"But, if we loop around, we can avoid the major bridges. Then again, this route will take us through some of the more populated areas."

"And?"

"I have no clue if Takarada would expect us to go this way and set up an ambush, or just wait until we reached the high school. The other thing is, is that this route would be perfect for setting one up. The buildings here are all at least ten to fifteen stories tall. For all we know, he could have people stationed on the roofs just waiting until we show."

"It seems like you might be over thinking this, Takahiro."

"Probably so, but I'd rather over think it than underestimate Takarada."

"So be it, we will take the route through the populated areas of Osaka. Even if there is an ambush set up, the trucks can withstand them. We *can't* withstand explosives, however."

"My thoughts exactly," Akio agreed and capped his marker. "It'll take an extra ten or fifteen minutes, but I'd rather get there a bit late than never get there at all."

Holding up the map he drew on without raising his head, he handed it over to the people he had pointed out earlier, and the students ran off to relay his orders.

"Now then," Akio said and crossed his arms, leaning his rear against the truck bed. "For the plan of attack."

"What'd you have in mind?" Uzu asked and mimicked Akio's movements.

"Surround the high school with the trucks and students. Cut off any possible escape routes, and contain them to that area. If we can keep the conflict *just* at the location of the school, then the rest of Osaka won't have to get caught in this conflict. Just repel every attack they make and then retaliate, but do so in a reserved matter. We don't need to slaughter them, only beat them thoroughly."

"Hmmm. I thought you'd rather just outlast them. Seemed more your style."

"Well, I would, but Takarada would never surrender unless he was beaten. With the money he has, we'd never be able to outlast him."

"Good point," Uzu said. "Alright, I can do that."

"Good. Just remember, try and be sensible out there. If the enemy is retreating or running away, let them. There's no need to stop them and chase them down. Nor is there any need to get innocent civilians involved. You only need to beat Takarada to win the day."

"Anything else?"

"Takarada will use his vast amounts of wealth as his weapon. Literally and figuratively. Be prepared for anything."

Uzu nodded and pushed himself off of the truck.

"Okay. I'm going to the front to lead them, so this is farewell for now Takahiro," Uzu said and stuck his hand out.

Akio looked at the offered hand and back to Uzu, then to the hand, and then to Uzu.

"Farewell, Sanageyama," Akio replied and grasped his hand, giving it a hard shake. "For now."

Uzu smirked and pushed his hands into his pockets, turning on his heel and walking off to the front of the convoy.

Akio sighed slowly as he watched the Elite walk away. Now his true reason for being here began in earnest.

"The rest of you, listen up!" Akio called out to the students in front of him. "Go find another truck to stay in. I'm taking this one."

If his troops were confused, they didn't show it.

"Yes, sir!" They replied and all ran off to find appropriate transportation.

"WAIT!"

The battalion of students stopped, all of them turning their head back to their commander.

Walking forwards, Akio's jaw was clenched shut, his nostrils flared in anger at something he noticed.

"Sir?"

Reaching out, he grabbed one of his students by the arm, twisting it forcefully so that his elbow was facing upwards.

There, clear as day, was a black scrap of cloth, with red tendrils snaking from it and up and down the student's arm.

"What the fuck is this?" Akio hissed, his grip tightening around the unknown student's arm.

"I-I don't know s-sir!" The student stammered, withering underneath Akio's gaze. "It was there when I got it!"

Letting out a predatory growl, Akio ripped the cloth off of the uniform. There was no doubt about it. This was a piece of Senketsu.

"That son of a bitch," Akio cursed under his breath and turned to the other men. "Does anyone else have a scrap of cloth like this?"

All of them shook their heads.

"Then get the hell out of here."

The men scattered like flies, leaving Mako and Akio alone as quickly as they could.

Akio's fist clenched around the cloth in his hand, his whole arm shaking in anger. He should have known better.

"Come, Mako," Akio said and turned back to the truck, shoving the cloth into his pocket. "Let's go."

"Yes, sir!" Mako cried and followed Akio into the truck.

Akio said nothing as he sat down in the seat, buckling his seatbelt. He was still recovering from the tremendous amount of anger and hatred he was feeling burning in his chest.

Unfurling the other map he had, he scanned it until he found the Takahiro residence.

"There."

It was in the complete opposite direction as the way Uzu would be going, so it'd draw attention to himself when he left formation, but he still had to do this.

"You ready?" Akio asked the sprightly girl next to him as he turned the key in the ignition.

"Sure thing!" Mako saluted. "Where are we going, though?"

"To see my parents," Akio replied, his features darkening as he spoke. "And then, we're coming back here. I have business to settle."

As the truck began to drive off towards their destination, the dying sunlight gleamed off of the three silver stars on Akio's shoulder.

The trucks in the convoy began to move slowly, eventually picking up speed as they headed towards the path that Akio had set out for them.

Uzu sat in the front seat of the truck leading the convoy, his face set in determination as his shinai rested in his lap. This was a fight he was going to win, come hell or high water.

"Sanageyama, sir!" A voice cracked over his walkie-talkie.

"What?" Uzu replied, bringing his walkie-talkie up to his mouth.

"One of the trucks has left formation!" The voice replied over the receiver. "We believe it to be Commander Takahiro himself. Should we bring him back?"

"No," Uzu answered. "Let him be, as per Lady Satsuki's orders."

"Yes sir!" The voice responded once more before cutting out.

Uzu smirked and put down the walkie-talkie, his head turning to the open window beside him.

Yes, this too was planned by Satsuki. Akio Takahiro's role in this fight was never to be a 'tactician,' as Satsuki told him. Uzu could have come up with an appropriate plan of attack just as well as he could, Takahiro was never really needed for their success. Everything that Satsuki told the man was just to persuade him into accepting the Goku uniform and to make sure he came to Osaka.

No, this was never about integrating Takahiro into their system. His role in everything was inconsequential.

This was just a test.

Author's notes:

So, there you have it! I hope you all enjoyed it!

A little strife between Ryuko and Akio, but it shouldn't be anything the two can't get over. I think. At least Aikuro was a bro about it.

Other than that, a bunch of set up stuff for the next chapter: the big showdown in Osaka. Should be fun!

Thanks for reading, everyone! I hope you all have a nice weekend!

Until next time!

Trial by Fire

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

With this chapter we get into the brunt of Akio's personal mission, as well as some other stuff!

And of course, thanks for the influx of reviews! I really appreciate all of the support guys.

I don't have much to say in this author's notes, so I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

Akio was seconds away from grabbing the steering wheel in front of him and careening the car into a brick wall. That would save him from this torment.

"The wheels on the truck go round and round, round and round, round and round! The wheels on the truck round and round, all through the town!"

He did everything in his power to try and drown out the sound of Mako singing the same child's tune over and over again. He hummed a song of his own, he tried to remember the entire story of the last book he read, hell, he even tried to discover the meaning of life, but Mako's singing would not go unheard, no matter what he tried

She had been at it for at least an hour now, ever since the two had taken the truck and drove away from Uzu's convoy. It was somewhat funny at first, and even cheered Akio up a little bit, but after the

thirtieth rendition of 'The Wheels on the Bus,' Akio was ready to blow his brains out. It almost made him miss Uzu's company on these car rides. At least he was quiet most of the trip. He loved Mako to death, but good heavens she could she get annoying on a long car ride, and sadly, they had at least another half hour to go.

Had she even stopped to breathe?

"The wheels on the-"

"Mako!" Akio blurted out, the endless singing finally getting the best of him.

"Yes?"

"Maybe we could sing something else for a little while? Or even do something else entirely?"

"Oh, I see," Mako nodded to herself, rubbing her chin in contemplation, then snapped her fingers. "We could talk? Or tell each other jokes! Let's tell each other jokes!"

"Talking is fine," Akio answered quickly. "Talking is more than fine. What would you like to talk about?"

Talking sounded good. Akio was still more than a little on edge given the circumstances, so maybe talking to a close friend would help him-

"Do you like anyone?"

Akio glanced over at Mako, raising an eyebrow.

"I like lots of people, Mako. You'd have to be more specific."

"You know," Mako wiggled her eyebrows, grinning predatorily at her friend. "Like *like* someone."

"Oh, good god. Pass."

"Pass?" Mako blinked. "You can't just pass!"

"I just did, though."

"B-but-"

"Pick something else."

"Fine," Mako pouted, crossing her arms in front of her chest childishly. "We're going to see your parents, right?"

Akio nodded, his eyes on the road.

"Well, what are they like? You don't seem to talk about them much."

Akio winced.

"Pass-"

"No! No passing! You only get one!"

"Only one? When did that become a rule?"

"It just did," Mako answered, clearly proud with herself for thinking so quickly on her feet. "Come on, spill it."

Akio sighed and rolled his eyes, but he didn't object.

"I actually don't know much about them, to be honest."

"Why not?" Mako asked.

"I was adopted," Akio shrugged with his hands still on the wheel. "I've only met them once so far."

"You were adopted?" Mako repeated.

"Yep."

"Huh."

Mako nodded to herself, clearly lost in thought as she took all of this information in.

"So, why are we going to go see them, then?"

Akio's eyes widened at that.

That question was surprising, to say the least. Not that it was a strange question. He just wasn't exactly expecting Mako to connect the dots like this. Mako was smart, in her own way of course, but he couldn't say he was expecting to have a serious conversation with the girl.

"I want to get them out of Osaka and somewhere safe."

"How're you going to do that?" Mako asked, continuing her endless barrage of questions. Akio almost wished he had let the singing continue.

"I'm going to give them this truck. If they're driving an Academy vehicle, I don't think anyone will stop them. At least, that's what I'm hoping."

"So... if we're giving them this truck... how are we getting back?"

"Well, uh..."

Shit. He hadn't thought of that. He could just hitch a ride with them until they got to the outskirts of town, but Akio had no intention of going that way. He was heading to the center.

They could... walk? Or steal a car? It wouldn't be the first time he hotwired one.

He really, *really*, didn't want to walk back, so hotwiring it is.

"Let's just go back to singing," Akio sighed.

"Okay!" Mako clapped happily and cleared her throat. "Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer! Take one down, pass it around, ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall!"

"... Kill me."

The last half hour passed by quicker than Akio expected, given Mako's never ending singing.

"Two bottles of beer on the wall, two bottles of beer! Take one down, pass it around, one bottle of beer on the wall!"

At least it was almost over; for this ride at least.

The sky above them began to grow more and more red as the minutes ticked by. The red tint of the sky was disturbing, really. He knew it wasn't because of the setting sun. No, it was because of the battle raging in the streets. The rising smoke and the sounds of explosions were evident of that.

Each time he could actually hear an explosion rock in the distance, his hands clenched tighter around the steering wheel.

Time was of the essence now. Each minute lost was a minute wasted.

As the truck tootled along, the city landscape began to slowly change into that of a suburban landscape. It seemed that the Takahrios lived in wealth, if nothing else.

The green grass and thick trees of the people's lawns contacted heavily to the red sky above. It was as if this entire neighborhood was left untouched by the war that was going on only an hour's drive away.

Akio wasn't going to take any chances with their safety. He would take no chances with his sister's most of all.

"This is it," Akio said as he pressed down on the brakes.

The truck stopped in front of a western style home. It was had two floors, and the exterior was painted all white. A giant oak tree stood out front, with a tire swing hanging off of one of the branches. It looked like it had come straight out of one of those housekeeping magazines. It was almost too perfect, honestly.

This is what being the members of wealthy families will do for you.

The lights of the Takahiro residence were still on, and if the parked car in the driveway was any indication, they were still home.

"Let's go, Mako."

Mako nodded and followed Akio's example, opening her door and hopping out of the truck.

The two walked up to the front door. Akio raised his hand to knock, but hesitated.

There, in the window next to the door, the Takahiros could be seen clearly in their home. His mother and father were sitting on an elegant couch, with Akiko sitting in between them. Their arms were all wrapped around each other, and a bowl of popcorn sat in Akiko's lap, threatening to spill over at a moment's notice.

All three of their eyes were glued to the television screen in front of them, their hands occasionally reaching out to grab a handful of popcorn.

They were just going about their normal day, completely oblivious to the perils outside.

"Akio?"

Mako went unheard by Akio, his mind drifting off into thought.

Frowning, he turned his head back to the open yard behind him, his eyes moving to the tire swing in the front yard and then to the rest of the house.

It just looked so perfect.

It's like this was one of those houses you always pictured having when you had your own family. The giant front yard, the lovely neighborhood, the tire swing. There was probably even a tiny wooded area in the backyard with a stream running through it. Akiko and her friends probably spent hours back there playing make-believe or exploring the vast, uncharted world. Dozens of cookouts, birthday parties, Christmas celebrations probably took place here.

"Akio, is everything alright?"

What if this had been his life? How different things would be... He'd probably be attending the very school that was getting attacked today. He would have gone there every day, seeing the same batch of kids day in and day out, doing his best to be an honor student so he could get into a great university. He would have come home to the same house, to the same parents, and the same sister, every single day. God, how different his life would be. He might have even had a part time job, or be in a relationship with some cute girl. Hell, he even might of had a few familiar friends.

If things were different, he could have been in there right now, exchanging jokes and eating popcorn.

A normal life.

"Akio!"

He wouldn't have these scars. He probably wouldn't even know what true pain felt like. He wouldn't have ever known the Mikisugis, nor the Mankanshokus. The term 'Life Fibers' or 'Goku uniforms' would have just been gibberish to him. The Kiryuins would have just been

another name to him. Honnouji Academy would have been just some school he read about in the newspapers.

He would have never met Ryuko.

"Akio!"

Fed up with her friend's spacing out, Mako grabbed Akio by the shoulder and shook him forcefully.

"W-what?" Akio blinked and shook his head, recovering from his trance. "Sorry, Mako. I spaced out for a bit."

"It's okay, buddy," Mako grinned and patted Akio on the back. "Well, come on! I wanna meet your parents!"

Akio nodded and banged his fist against the door, this time without hesitation.

As much as he might have wanted it in this moment, this life will never be his. All he could do now was protect it for Akiko, the little four year old that had already laid claim to a large chunk of his heart.

The door opened, revealing one Hiroshi Takahiro.

His father blinked, clearly not expecting to see Akio.

"Akio?"

"Hello, Hiroshi," Akio greeted flatly. "I need to talk to-"

"Akio!?"

Akio could hear the soft pitter patter of feet hitting the carpet as Akiko rounded the corner and came into view, Kasumi Takahiro right behind her.

"Akio!"

The little toddler barreled into his waist, wrapping her small arms around him and giggling madly.

Akio swallowed the lump in his throat and hesitantly placed his hand on her head, tousling her long brown hair.

"Hello, Akiko. It's, uh, good to see you."

Akiko looked up at her brother with big, excited eyes, her face as bright as the sun.

"Did you come early for my birthday!?"

Akio paled. Oh. Right. Shit.

"Oh my gosh, you're so cute!" Mako exclaimed and trotted over to Akiko, kneeling down beside her.

Mako just saved his ass.

"Who's your friend, Akio?" Kasumi asked with a smirk.

"This is Mako Mankanshoku," Akio introduced her with a wave.

"She's a friend from school. She wanted to come and meet you."

"And what's your name?" Mako cooed, poking Akiko on the nose.

"Um... A-Akiko," The little girl stammered, moving behind Akio's legs to put some distance between her and the stranger.

"So adorable," Mako sighed and looked over to Akio's parents, only now noticing their pointed looks. "Oh! Hello! I'm Mako, pleased to meet you!"

"We're Hiroshi and Kasumi Takahiro," Hiroshi bowed. "It's a pleasure to meet one of Akio's friends, especially one so lively."

Kasumi grinned and nodded, then turned to her son.

"Do you two want to come in? We were just watching a movie, but you're free to join us."

"Can we Akio?!" Mako blurted, turning to her friend with hopeful eyes.

Akio winced internally, but he had to get this over with sooner or later.

"Actually, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Alright," Hiroshi nodded and motioned to inside the house. "Well, why don't you come in and we'll talk."

"I'm sorry, but we can't," Akio shook his head. "There's no time."

"Why?"

"You need to leave here."

Kasumi rose an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I don't have the time to explain fully, but you have to get as far away as possible," Akio began and pointed to the sky. "If you don't believe me, just look at the horizon."

The two parents looked skeptically at Akio, but did as they were told and looked to the now red sky, where pillars of smoke could be seen off in the distance.

Akiko also looked at the sky, letting out a soft whimper at the sight before her and hugged herself tighter to her brother's leg.

"Honey..."

"I know, I see it," Hiroshi replied breathlessly, his eyes transfixed on the blood red sky. "How is such a thing possible?"

"Simple," Akio replied with a frown. "This is caused by the purging deemed necessary by Satsuki Kiryuin."

"P-purging?" Kasumi stammered.

"Yes," Akio nodded slowly. "Her and the rest of Honnouji Academy have traveled to the three major cities of the Kansai region to tear them down and rebuild them to fit her vision. As you can see, Osaka has already been devastated."

Kasumi gasped and placed a hand over her mouth, while Hiroshi's face paled, his jaw tightening.

Hiroshi turned to Akio, finally tearing his eyes from the ominous sky.

"What should we do?"

"Pack up some necessities and leave," Akio replied and pointed to the truck behind him. "I have a transport for you. It's the only way you'll be able to get out of the city without getting stopped. As long as you avoid downtown, you should be okay. Do you have a place you can go to while things blow over?"

Kasumi and Hiroshi shared a look as they both came to the same realization.

"Everyone we know lives here..." Hiroshi trailed off, rubbing his chin.

"I guess we could go find a hotel?" Kasumi put forth.

"Nope! No, no way," Mako interjected and stepped over to Akio's parents, poking them both once in the chest. "Any family of Akio's is family of mine. You can come and stay at my place!"

"Unacceptable," Akio butt in, narrowing his eyes. "I won't send them to Honnou City."

"Awh, why not?" Mako whined. "I mean, it's the safest place right now, isn't it?"

"Are you insane-"

Akio stopped. All of the Academy was in the Kansai region. There was no Satsuki and no Elite Four in Honnou City. No one in their right mind would attack a fortress such as Honnouji Academy. By the time the student body returned, the Takahiros could just head back to their home here in Osaka.

Did... did Mako out think him on this?

But there was still the matter on housing arrangements.

"Well, you may be right," Akio admitted. "But could your parents really take in another three people? It's packed enough as it is."

"Pshh," Mako laughed and waved him off. "Of course we can! We Mankanshokus are a wily bunch!"

"No, no, no," Kasumi said. "We couldn't possibly put you out like that. We'll find a hotel, it's quite alright."

"No!"

Everyone rose an eyebrow at the now impassioned Mako.

"You're going to stay with us, and you're going to like it!" Mako shouted, her cheeks puffing out with determination.

The Takahiros stared dumbly at Mako, their mouths slightly agape.

"Brother," Akiko reached up and tugged on Akio's hand. "She's scary..."

"Well, alright then!" Hiroshi laughed after a moment of silence, enthusiastically patting Mako on the back. "You've convinced us. We'd love to stay with your family. Maybe then we can learn some more about our son and his friends, too."

"I wouldn't say that-"

"Yeah!" Mako grinned, cutting Akio off. "We have tons of stories about Akio we can tell you!"

"R-really?" Akiko poked her head out from behind Akio.

Akio was ready to protest obstinately, but his parents and Akiko just looked so damn excited about it. Why? Were they really this excited to learn about someone they had only met once? It didn't make sense.

Why did they care so much about him?

"So be it," Akio conceded. "We don't have much time. Go get packed."

The Takahiros nodded and grabbed their daughter by the hand, quickly walking back into their house.

Akio sighed and ran a hand through his hair. So far, so good. He just had to get them out of here, and then he could head back into the thick of it.

"Are you sure you're alright with this, Mako?" Akio asked her friend.

"You betcha!" Mako replied, giving him a thumbs up. She clearly had no doubts about it, so if she didn't, neither would he.

"If you say so," Akio shrugged.

A few minutes later, Kasumi and Hiroshi stepped out of the house with duffel bags, and Akiko right behind them, holding a small teddy bear and wearing a Hello Kitty backpack.

"... You're sure about this, right?" Hiroshi asked tentatively.

"Yes. Are you all ready?"

The three nodded, but Akiko stepped towards her brother, hugging her teddy to her chest.

"Are you coming with us, Akio?"

Akio grimaced slightly, which went unnoticed by Akiko, but was caught by his parents.

"I'm sorry, but I can't. There are some other things I have to do first."

Akiko visibly deflated, but she still nodded nonetheless.

"Hey, now," Akio said softly and knelt down beside her, placing his hand on her head. "I'll be back soon, I promise. And when I do return, we can do whatever you want, my treat. Think of it as a late birthday present."

Akiko smiled and nodded, this time much more happily.

Rising to his full height, Akio turned to address his parents.

"You should get going," He said and threw his father the keys. "Get to the highway and drive to Honnou City, and don't look back. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Akio then turned to Mako, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Go with them."

Mako blinked. "What?"

"They need someone to show them where to go, and besides..."

He wanted to tell her that it'd be dangerous for her to stay. Too dangerous. He didn't want her getting hurt, and after what happened in the arena, Akio knew that she didn't have any quarrels with jumping into the middle of things if her friends' lives were on the line. He couldn't have that. Not today.

Mako thought on Akio's words for a second before shaking her head.

"No, I'm going with you."

"Mako, I'm serious."

"And so am I," Mako replied firmly and crossed her arms. "Tell me, Akio, while you're out there looking out for everyone else, who's going to look after you?"

Akio's eyes widened. "Mako..."

"So, I'll do it! No ifs ands or buts about it."

Akio closed his eyes and exhaled slowly through his nose. If Mako was anything, she was stubborn. Especially when she put her mind to something.

"Fine, but please be careful, alright? For me?"

Mako smiled widely and nodded.

"Alright, then."

With that decided, Akio turned to his family, who was watching the scene play out with different levels of curiosity.

"You three get going."

His parents nodded and took Akiko by the hand, leading her over to the military truck that Akio had drove here.

"Thank you, Akio," Kasumi told her son as she climbed into the truck. "We won't forget this kindness you've shown us."

Kasumi looked from Akio to Mako.

"Nor the kindness you've shown us, Mako."

Akio nodded and clasped his hand over Mako's mouth, stopping her from saying anymore.

"Get going. If anyone stops you, tell them that Uzu Sanageyama let you through."

With Hiroshi in the driver's seat, he put the key in the ignition and turned and revved the engine. Before pressing down on the pedal, he met his son's eyes, giving him a single nod which Akio returned.

Akiko waved at her brother from her place in-between her parents, her face a mixture of sadness and displeasure. Everything had happened so fast that she probably wasn't even fully aware of what was going on, which made Akio feel even more for the tiny girl.

He only hoped that he could make it up to her somehow.

If he was given the chance, he would.

The truck slowly began to push forwards, and soon, as it picked up speed, it left the neighborhood.

Akio watched long after the truck was out of sight, his eyes vacant.

One job done, one more to go.

It'll only go downhill from here.

Uzu Sanageyama stood in the middle of the battlefield, lazily smacking away anyone dumb enough to challenge him.

It was still daylight out, but the flames and the smoke had risen to the skies above, blotting out the once blue sky. It was nothing but red and black now. A fitting sight for the field of battle, Uzu had thought.

It had been this way for the past few hours. After confronting Takarada, he had sent every able body he could at Uzu. It was pointless, but it didn't stop Takarada from trying. It was an

unstoppable force against an unstoppable object, except that Uzu knew which side would give in first.

Hearing his phone go off, Uzu pulled out the device and placed it against his ear.

"It sounds like Gamagoori and Jakuzure have wrapped things up on their end," Inumuta's voice said immediately upon connecting. "How are you coming along?"

Uzu smacked away a few more students before replying.

"Most of the Kinman High students have been dealt with," Uzu said, smacking away another group of students. "Tell Lady Satsuki that Osaka will be under her control soon."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that!"

Uzu turned away from his phone and to the new voice, his eyes narrowing.

"Takarada?"

"Buddy, you're underestimating my power," Takarada scowled at the Elite. "The students aren't my only pawns!"

Reaching into his white and black fur coat, Takarada pulled out several wads of cash and threw them high into the air.

Hundreds of Osaka's civilians appeared out of the woodwork, jumping high in to the air to grab the money. Upon hitting the ground, the crowd of adults pulled out various guns from their coats and pockets, pointing them directly at Uzu and his troops.

Without a second thought the group opened fire, sending several of the Academy's students flying in different directions.

"You're making the common masses fight for you too, you bastard!?" Uzu shouted as he charged at the man, his shinai knocking away

any projectile that threatened to hit him.

"I am indeed," Takarada snarled back. "But it's not quite accurate to call them common masses. They're all Combat Citizens who have been blinded by money."

Nearly an hour later, Akio and Mako stood before the battle-ridden valley before them. Hundreds of men and women were fighting tooth and nail against each other, fighting as if their lives were on the line. Punching, kicking, biting, stabbing; they were ruthless. With their lives threatened, each student fought like a caged animal, more than ready to tear the skin and flesh from their opponents. Who could blame them?

In the center Uzu Sanageyama could clearly be seen, as every student that came within his range was knocked aside as if they were nothing.

Akio grit his teeth, his nails digging into his palms.

"Dear god..."

"Wow, they're really going at it," Mako breathed, a little disturbed by the fight she was witnessing.

Akio's hands clenched tighter. Mako wasn't the only one disgusted by the sight.

There was only one thing left to do.

Akio closed his eyes, concentrating on the rapid beating of his heart. Honestly, he had no clue on how to activate his uniform. The Elite Four just seemed to be able to do it on will, but how could such a thing be possible? There had to be a trigger of some sorts. It couldn't be possible that you could just think about it and it would happen. That just didn't make sense.

"Well, aren't you going to transform or something?" Mako asked.

Akio sighed, but kept his eyes shut. Mako's pressing would definitely not help his concentration.

There had to be something... Maybe if he thought about something important to him?

Starting with the basics, Akio thought back to his family. Aikuro, Akiko, his parents, the Mankanshokus, Ryuko. He thought about what would happen if he failed today. Akiko's house would be destroyed, the Mankanshokus could be endangered, as well as his brother. Aikuro might even lose his life if his position with Nudist Beach was discovered. Satsuki and the rest of the Academy would probably bring Ryuko down.

... Nothing.

Since that didn't work, Akio thought about what was happening down below. The very people he wanted to help were now fighting for their lives, some of them even becoming seriously injured. The city around him was in flames, and the sky above him was blood red. If he didn't stop it here, this city could be ruined completely, and hundreds of lives would be ruined.

... Nothing.

"Why?!" Akio growled in a hushed whisper. Why wasn't that enough?! Bullshit!

He could hear Mako sigh behind him.

"I wonder if Ryuko is okay..." She said to herself quietly. "I never got to tell her I was leaving. I hope she's okay."

Akio's eyes snapped open.

He could feel his chest begin to burn.

Nui Harime. Ryuko losing control. Senketsu swallowing her. Senketsu's straps of cloth being stolen.

The three silver stars on his shoulder began to heat up, nearly burning through his cloth and into his skin.

The fever dream he had the night he was injured by Iori burned hotly in his brain as if someone had branded it there.

"Akio..."

It was just as he remembered. When he opened his eyes, he only saw the wasteland before him, but when he closed them, he could see every memory of the dream, every detail.

"H-help me," He could hear Ryuko whimper, although he couldn't see her. He wouldn't force himself to close his eyes again. *"They were... too strong... I couldn't... do it..."*

"Akio... help me..."

The sound of a blade cutting through air echoed through his ears, followed by the sound of a blade piercing flesh.

The three silver stars shone bright on Akio's shoulder, eventually enveloping him in their bright light.

Never again. Not even a dream like that would haunt his subconscious.

No more. He'd get it to stop. He'd *make* it stop.

The words came to his mouth without his brain telling it to do so.

"Three Star Goku Uniform-!"

Takarada pulled out another handful of cash, causing the eyes of every citizen in attendance to glint at the sight. Even the old ladies in

the crowd salivated at the money.

"Everyone in this town right now is itching to fight! They're tough!"

Another barrage of bullets and salvo of missiles flew towards Uzu, but with his ability he was able to see them and block every single one of them.

"What'cha think of the Kaneo Takarada and the I Heart Osaka Brigade?" Takarada laughed, flaunting even more of his endless amounts of cash. "If you want to take Osaka, you'll have to kill every last one of us!"

Takarada smiled devilishly, throwing the money in his hand to the crowd behind him without even turning his head.

"In the end, it's money that motivates folks."

"You 'heart' it, eh? What's the sense in destroying your own city?" Uzu countered hotly.

"We'll just rebuild it afterwards!" Takarada replied and raised another fistful of money. "The contractors will love all the extra work thrown their way!"

Throwing his arms out, the wads of cash flew from his hands and into the sky once more.

"Okay, people! Kill that man, and I'll give you a million Takarada Bucks! Make him suffer!"

Hundreds of hands went up to snatch the money out of the air, more than happy to comply with Takarada's orders.

With the money in their hands, all guns and bazookas were trained directly at Uzu and the rest of his men.

"Tch!"

Uzu brought his shinai up. He'd be able to protect himself, but his men were done for.

"How are you gonna deal with all these people, then?" Takarada laughed madly.

Then, as if the clouds themselves had parted to let in heaven's holy light, a bright yellow light shone down on Uzu and Takarada.

Everyone's heads turned up to face the blinding light.

"What's that light?" Takarada gasped.

Descending from the heavens, Satsuki Kiryuin slowly made her way to the ground as she held on to the rope that was connected to her own personal helicopter. The light glinted off of her unsheathed Bakuzan, as well as the red glove she wore on her right hand.

"L-lady Satsuki!" Uzu stammered, clearly as surprised as anyone else.

"It's been too long, missy," Takarada said from his perch on the tower made by the bodies of his citizens. "You've become quite the babe, I see!"

Satsuki stepped off of the rope and stood next to Uzu, staring down Takarada.

"And you've become ever more loathsome. Though I can't remember where I met you."

"Not since the garden party to celebrate your grade school graduation," Takarada answered. "You don't remember the Takarada Conglomerate's heir doing you the honor of appearing in person?"

"You should feel honored that I have some vague recollection of your seedy face."

"Ha! Same as before, you still look down on everyone like you enjoy it. You're sorely mistaken if you think you're gonna have your way all the time," Takarada grinned, the light reflecting off of his golden teeth.

"What's mistaken is your brain for thinking you could oppose me," Satsuki retorted coolly. "Purchasing human life with money? How were you raised to be able to use money in such a vile way?"

"There's no 'clean' or 'dirty' when it comes to money! Japan is split under two massive conglomerates: the Takaradas in the west, and the Kiryuins in the east. If we don't throw this money around, who will?!"

"You seem to have been fixated on the power of those strange outfits lately," Takarada continued. "But let me bottom-line it for you..."

Takarada threw another handful of cash in the air, sparking the greed of every citizen in attendance. All of them jumped into the air, their hands flying wildly as they grabbed every bill and every coin.

"For the right amount, all these people will fight and gladly lay down their lives for me!"

With the money in their hands the crowd then turned their attention to Satsuki and Uzu, killing intent gleaming in their eyes along with greed.

"In any era, it's money that motivates folks!"

"On that, you're mistaken."

Satsuki's blade cut through the air as she swung it with great elegance. The blade moved faster than anyone's eyes could even track. It was impossible to tell if it even hit anyone. It didn't look like it did.

The crowd all stared dumbly at Satsuki, not budging another inch towards or away from her.

"What was that, some kind of bluff?" Takarada pondered.

"What I struck was their hearts."

Satsuki bopped her fist on the hilt of her sword.

The crowd all fell to their knees, utterly defeated. It wasn't their bodies that were damaged, it was their will to fight. Even a blind man could see that if they continued any further, they were dead.

"Leave us, fools! Or my next strike will take your lives!"

Satsuki swung her sword once more, causing a whirlwind to erupt in the area and knock away every citizen and every student still there.

"She's bad news!" One man yelled.

"Live to fight another day!" Another agreed.

And just like that, Takarada's army of peasants fled the scene, leaving Uzu, Satsuki, and Takarada by themselves.

"Do you see now, Takarada? It is not money that rules men. It is fear."

With every citizen gone, the tower of people that Takarada was residing on collapsed. Hitting the ground with a thud, Takarada rubbed his head gingerly.

"You think you've beaten me with that little stunt?!"

"Don't resort to bravado, Takarada," Uzu smirked. "Your voice is shaking with fear."

"Oh, I'm scared! I'm scared all right!"

Takarada scampered away on his behind, reaching into his coat to pull out a remote control.

With the press of a button, the ground beneath Takarada broke away. What could only be described as a giant, golden crab appeared beneath him, sucking Takarada up into its cockpit.

"Say hello to my anti-Honnouji Academy mechanized weapon, Dontonbori Robo!"

A golden head appeared out of the very top of it, its mouth moving as Takarada himself talked.

"When you're weak, use something very strong shamelessly! That's my philosophy for certain victory!"

"Pathetic," Satsuki growled at the sight of the man.

"How incredibly tacky," Uzu agreed.

"Oh? You can tell even without eyes?" Takarada goaded.

"Yes. I can sense it by aura alone-the smell of your overblown arrogance."

"Your opinion..."

Takarada raised his crab's golden claw.

"... Don't add up to jack!"

And smacked it into the ground where Satsuki and Uzu were standing.

The two jumped away easily, but the strike still destroyed the ground, sending rocks and dust flying every which way.

Satsuki's eyebrow twitched as the two fell to the ground. She could feel enormous amounts of killing intent coming from somewhere off

in the distance.

"Lady Satsuki!"

Uzu appeared to have felt it as well, as he jumped from each falling rock to put himself in front of Satsuki.

The whistling sound of a blade cutting through air echoed in the distance. Within seconds at least a dozen knives became visible as they flew directly at Satsuki.

Uzu used his shinai to block every single one of them effortlessly.

The two fell back to the ground, both of them staring off into the distance. Something that could only be described as a black blur danced around the destroyed buildings, but it was moving so fast that neither could get a good sight on it.

"Who's there?!" Uzu called out. "Show yourself coward!"

The minute he finished that sentence a boot connected with his face, sending him sprawling backwards.

The black blur that they once saw came to a stop before them, its figure easy to make out.

The figure was decked out in a suit of black combat armor with a black helmet to match. Leather plates covered his shoulders and the area where his heart would be, as well as the other vital areas of his body. A bandolier was strapped across his chest, filled with a different assortment of knives; several more knives were strapped to his thighs, as well. Even though he had thrown at least a dozen of them at the two, the bandolier was still completely stocked.

The eyes of the helmet shone a bright green, contracting with the blackness of his exterior. Three white lines marked the right side of the helmet, going across the eye. Instead of having anything where the mouth would be, the helmet was smooth.

"Takahiro," Satsuki narrowed her eyes.

"Give me that glove, Kiryuin," Akio growled, the sound of his voice altered due to the helmet he wore. It sounded more mechanical now than human.

It was clear that Akio had no intention of having a conversation. His fists were already raised and he had already fallen into stance.

Satsuki didn't say anything, only taking a step back and readying her sword in front of her.

Takarada watched the two with a dropped jaw, still not entirely sure what he was seeing. Satsuki had just called the armored man Takahiro. Takarada had only known one Takahiro in his lifetime. He had no problem with bombarding the trio with his missiles, but a part of him made himself wait. He wanted to see this play out.

Jump!

Without a second thought Akio back-flipped away.

A boulder the size of his own body slammed into where he was once standing, which would have crushed him like an ant if he had got hit.

"As long as Ira Gamagoori draws breath, I will not allow so much as a scratch on Lady Satsuki!"

Ira Gamagoori himself dropped onto the scene from nowhere, with none other than Nonon Jakuzure and Houka Inumuta on his shoulders. All three of them were wearing new gold and white Three Star uniforms.

"You should really stop pressing your luck," Nonon purred.

"I'll be recording the data from these new Three Star Goku uniforms," Inumuta said and pushed the glasses up on his nose. "Especially on one so new."

Akio took a step back, but kept his fists raised, ready to react.

"Apologies for the delay, Lady Satsuki," Gamagoori said as he walked over to her. "The Kobe and Kyoto School Raid Brigades have now arrived."

"Good work," Satsuki commended the three.

As if on cue, the sounds of a helicopter could be heard above, followed by the lights from its headlights.

"Catch, Sanageyama!" Iori's voice echoed through the intercom. "Here's your new Goku uniform!"

A giant wardrobe fell from the helicopter, racing towards the ground below.

"Just what I've been waiting for!" Uzu shouted, jumping up on Gamagoori and jumping again towards the wardrobe.

Akio growled and brought his hands to his chest, grabbing a handful of knives and chucking them at the flying Uzu.

Gamagoori raised his giant hand to intercept them, knocking them all away and back to the ground.

Uzu made his way to his uniform unimpeded. The minute his body touched the wood of the cabinet, his body was enveloped in a bright green light.

The wardrobe fell to the ground, with Uzu Sanageyama landing on top of it, decked out in his more sleek and compact looking Goku uniform.

Akio took a step forward this time, gritting his teeth. Regardless of the Elite Four's timely arrival, he still had a mission to complete.

In the blink of an eye Akio raised his leg and kicked hard at the ground, sending up a cloud of dust and dirt, effectively hiding his

body in the cloud. With the cloud blocking the sight of him, he shot forwards.

Satsuki raised her blade at the exact right time, blocking the attack from Akio.

Except this time, Akio didn't use the knives strapped to his body.

A long, singular curved blade had jutted out over each of his wrists, the light from the fires glinting off of their silver surface. They were similar to the bladed gloves he had once used, but instead there was only one blade on each hand, and it was much thicker and sharper.

Duck!

Following his instincts, Akio ducked and rolled, dodging a horizontal slash from Satsuki's blade.

The Elite Four moved to intercept Akio, but Satsuki raised a hand to stop them.

"No," Satsuki declared. "He is my opponent. Sanageyama deal with Takarada. The rest of you stay back."

Uzu nodded and sprinted forwards to meet Takarada in combat, while the other three took a step back to watch.

The blades on Akio's wrists retracted as he rose back to his full height, his glowing green eyes meeting Satsuki's calm blue ones.

"You will give back what you stole."

"Then you will have to take it from me," Satsuki scowled, raising her blade. She didn't seem surprised in the slightest by the change in events.

Akio stopped before charging forwards, his head tilting to the side.

"It seems as if you expected it to end this way. Why?"

Drop!

Akio fell onto his back, his arms propping him up.

The second he had done so, Satsuki's blade had cut through the air where he was once standing. It appeared that the time for talking was long gone.

That was one thing he had noticed when his Goku uniform had activated. His reflexes had increased at least tenfold. He could nearly feel the attacks before they even happened. But even then, when fighting someone such as Satsuki Kiryuin, that would only get him so far.

With his back still to the ground, Akio raised his leg to kick at Satsuki's neck.

Satsuki saw this coming and grabbed Akio's leg in a vice grip, throwing him away from her.

Akio hit the ground and rolled, hopping back to his feet and releasing the blades above his wrists once more.

"Come, Takahiro," Satsuki said as her hands moved to the bracers on her arm. "Test your convictions against mine and we shall see who emerges victorious!"

With a flick of her wrist she slapped the bracers down, activating her Kamui.

"Life Fiber Override, Kamui Junketsu!"

"No you don't!"

Akio threw out his hands, sending several knives at the transforming Satsuki.

The blades struck home, but...

"What?!"

They just bounced off. As Junketsu transformed and strapped himself to Satsuki's body, his cloth had repelled every single one.

Apparently it wasn't so simple.

As the light that enveloped Satsuki began to wither out, her form was revealed, activated Kamui and all.

"I won't hold back, Takahiro," Satsuki told him before she disappeared.

Back!

Akio jumped away right as Satsuki's blade cleaved through where he once was. The tip of her blade passed right past Akio's eye.

Damn, she's fast!

Block!

Akio raised his blades, blocking an overhead strike that he could hardly see.

His crossed blades pushed against Satsuki's Bakuzan, but Satsuki didn't seem that worried.

Before he could even react, Satsuki brought her leg up and kicked Akio in his head, sending him flying like a rocket across the ground. His body skipped across the surface like a rock, eventually flying into the ruins of a destroyed building.

"Gah!"

He came to a stop when he slammed into the concrete of a fallen building's wall, his body slumping to the ground. The impact caused a crack in the wall, as well as a few pieces of rubble to land on his body.

"No..." Akio whimpered, his hands clenching at the dirt beneath him.

He wouldn't lose like this.

The fight just started. He couldn't get beaten this handily.

He wouldn't lose like this.

He wouldn't lose to someone like her. He'd rather slit his own throat before kneeling.

He wouldn't lose like this.

"No."

This was far from over

He wouldn't lose like this.

Satsuki stayed in place, putting Bakuzan back in its sheathe.

The building that she had just knocked Akio into had collapsed, sending up a huge cloud of dirt and dust.

It seemed that he wasn't the man she thought he was. If someone like that would lose to a single strike from her, he would be of no use to her.

Satsuki Kiryuin did not need weaklings, nor did she need cowards.

The sounds of the battle boomed behind her. The smacking sounds of Uzu's relentless attack echoed in the distance. From the sound of it, Takarada was already on the ropes. The shouts of 'Men,' 'Dou,' 'Kote,' and screams of pain signified Uzu's upcoming victory.

As expected.

Satsuki turned away from the destroyed building, beginning her walk back to-

"NO!"

Spinning on her heel, Satsuki raised her Bakuzan to block the oncoming blade.

The discarded blade fell to the ground, rattling around as it hit the surface.

As if some half-assed attack like that would work.

"What?"

The blade on the ground wasn't one of the knives she was expecting. It was one of Akio's wrist blades.

Feeling the hair on neck stand up on end, Satsuki turned her head up, but it was too late.

Akio was flying high above her in the air, his hand grabbing on to his other arm as he took aim at the class president.

The second blade fired from Akio's wrist, barreling directly towards Satsuki.

Satsuki jumped away, but the blade had already found its target.

A small scratch marked Satsuki's cheek as she hopped away and Akio's blade slammed into the ground.

As Satsuki came to a stop, she wiped her thumb across the small gash on her cheek and turned to face the man beside her.

Satsuki was ready to charge the man that had actually been able to scratch her, but stopped.

Akio's arms were still raised and his hands were clenched into fists.

As he slowly rotated his hands, the light gleamed off of the small red strings he was holding in each hand.

"The Life Fiber strings are attached to his blades," Satsuki murmured, a small smirk gracing her lips. Iori and Akio really out did themselves.

Akio jerked his hands towards him, the strings that he held in his hands pulling on the blades that they were connected to.

Satsuki raised her sword to block the wrist blades and smack them away, but Akio just flung his hands around and sent the blades back at her.

The fight continued this way for the next few minutes. Akio would throw his hands all about, controlling his discarded wrist blades with a string, while Satsuki danced back and forth, either dodging or blocking the blades.

An explosion boomed in the distance, signaling the end of the fight between Uzu and Takarada.

Akio didn't have much time. Satsuki knew that as well.

Throwing her blade in the air, Satsuki reached out grabbed the two thin strings, then caught the blade in her mouth.

"Shit."

Satsuki tugged hard on the strings, sending Akio flying towards her.

As Akio flew towards her, she raised her leg, ready to knock Akio back away with a brutal kick to his chest.

"Ngh!"

The foot connected with his chest, but Akio reached out and grabbed on to her leg, stopping himself from being thrown away.

He was planning on using his grip to throw Satsuki, but Satsuki twisted her neck, slashing at Akio with the blade in her mouth.

Lest he get cut, Akio ducked beneath the blow and let go of her leg, but Satsuki used this movement to her advantage.

Using her other leg, she hopped into the air and delivered a kick to the side of Akio's helmet, once again sending him sprawling across the ground.

Akio rolled across the surface, eventually coming to a stop. As he picked himself back up he retracted the strings connected to his wrist blades, and the blades locked into their spots above his wrists.

At this point, the fight with Takarada was long over, and Uzu was standing among the rest of the Elite Four with Takarada flailing helplessly in his arms. He wasn't going to get away without having a word with Satsuki first.

"You'll have to do better than that to defeat me, Takahiro," Satsuki called out to him as she readied her blade one final time.

Akio raised his fists once more, ready to attack. He knew that he was on the ropes. That was his last tactic, and even then it was out of pure luck. He barely knew how this damn uniform worked, let alone what it could do.

His head twitching, Akio turned to his right. Off in the distance he could faintly hear the sound of a motorcycle engine...

Satsuki seemed to hear it as well, as she too turned her head towards the sound.

A red motorcycle came into view as it flew in the air.

"It can't be..." Akio mumbled.

On the back of the motorcycle sat Ryuko wearing a red track suit with Senketsu's scarf tied around her neck and a pair of orange

sunglasses over her eyes. Her guitar case was strapped to her back as always, which was of no surprise.

Mako sat behind her, her eyes closed in fear as the motorcycle flew through the air.

The bike hit the ground and bounced, but kept moving towards the two, skidding to a stop and kicking up dirt as it slowed down before Satsuki.

Satsuki's eyes widened, her mouth slightly agape as she caught sight of Ryuko.

"Looks like you're having fun throwing your weight around..."

Ryuko paused, tearing the glasses off of her face as her eyes narrowed at her rival.

"Satsuki Kiryuin!"

Author's Notes:

So there you have it!

Alright, before anything, let me give you an easier description of Akio's Goku uniform. Think a mixture between Deathstroke from Marvel and Zero from Borderlands 2.

Anyhow, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I had fun writing it, truly. It was fun writing the tidbit between Akio and Satsuki. These two haven't duked it out yet, so that was fun to write.

We also got to see some more of Akio's inner feelings and thoughts, which is always fun. I always enjoy writing those.

Next chapter we'll get to the conclusion of the fight! Thanks for reading everyone!

Until next time!

Ashes to Ashes

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

This one was going to be a lot longer, but I decided to break it up into two chapters. Partly because this whole chapter will be fighting, and I didn't really like the transition I had to the next important scene, so I decided to just break them up into two. It felt like it read better that way.

With that being said, the next chapter should be out in a few days. There's a certain scene coming up that I really want to write and push out as soon as possible...

Anyhow, with this chapter we'll finish the fight in Osaka! I hope you all enjoy it!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Everything stood at a standstill for only a second.

Ryuko had gotten off of her motorcycle and had her scissor blade in hand, her eyes trained on Satsuki, not even noticing Akio in the background. The same went for Satsuki. Her eyes bored holes into Ryuko's, her sword pointed down to the ground harmlessly, but Akio knew Satsuki was just waiting for her chance to strike. Her Junketsu had went back into its slumber, reverting back to the white and blue uniform Satsuki had always been wearing. Why she had reverted back to her regular form was beyond him.

Each girl was staring each other down, waiting for the slightest of movements to attack.

Mako watched on in a stupor, unsure of what she should do.

The only one actually moving was Akio.

His fists were clenched at his sides, his teeth grinding inside his mouth. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

And he'd be lying if he said he wasn't a bit pissed that Satsuki would dare to turn her back on him as if he were nothing.

Taking a step forwards, he grabbed two knives from his bandolier, holding one firmly in each hand.

"Wrecking an entire town... don't you think that's a bit much?" Ryuko called out to Satsuki.

"You've come all this way just to tell me that?" Satsuki replied. "If so, your trip was for nothing. The fate of any who defy me is sealed."

"I'm going to change that fate!" Ryuko shot back, grabbing her scissor blade in both hands. "You're going to give Senketsu back!"

"As I told Takahiro," Satsuki smirked and raised her gloved hand. "You're going to have to take it back."

Akio's walk turned into a full out sprint.

Ryuko's eyes widened.

"... Takahiro?"

Ryuko's eyes finally broke away from Satsuki's, widening even more when they caught sight of the unfamiliar man in armor running towards them.

Her slight eye movement tipped Satsuki off to what was coming.

"AHHHH!"

Akio brought his hands up and slammed his wrist blades downwards towards Satsuki's shoulders as hard as he possibly could.

Satsuki spun on her heel, blocking Akio's strike with her Bakuzan.

"Tch!"

The sound of steel striking steel was nearly deafening.

Akio shivered, the strike sending a shock up his arms and down his spine. He pressed down hard on Satsuki, trying his hardest to overpower her.

Satsuki grit her teeth and pushed against Akio with all of her strength, resulting in a stalemate between the two.

"A-akio?"

Akio flinched at hearing Ryuko say his name, but he said nothing. If anything, he only pushed harder against the class president, feeling new strength in his muscles.

"Don't... underestimate... me," Akio growled between breaths.

"What's there... to underestimate?" Satsuki shot back between gritted teeth.

That made him snap.

With a flick of his hands, Akio threw the two knives he was holding at Satsuki's feet.

Satsuki noticed this immediately and hopped away from him, but this was exactly what Akio wanted.

Retracting his wrist blades Akio charged forwards, tackling Satsuki to the ground before she could land.

Satsuki grunted as she hit the dirt, Akio straddling her hips.

She bucked her hips an attempt to knock Akio off of her, but Akio only brought his head down and slammed her forehead with his helmet.

With Satsuki momentarily disabled, Akio pinned down Satsuki's right arm with his left, his right hand reaching for the red glove on her hand.

His fingers brushed against the red cloth of the Seki Tekko.

"Akio, look out!"

He could hear Mako call out to him, but his prize was already in sight. With just one solid grip he could tear the glove off!

"MEN!"

A wooden sword smacked into Akio's head, knocking him off of Satsuki and across the ground.

Akio eventually tumbled to a stop with his face to the dirt. Even with his helmet to cushion the blow, he still felt his vision blur. With a grunt he picked himself up to face his new challenger.

Uzu Sanageyama stood across from him, the tip of his shinai pointed directly at Akio.

"You will regret that, Sanageyama."

Akio punctuated his declaration by releasing his wrist blades once more.

He couldn't see Uzu's face beneath the helmet of his own, but he knew he was probably smirking.

Uzu always liked a good challenge.

"I warn you, this battle won't be the same as the last one we had," Uzu said. "You won't catch me off guard this time."

Ryuko was still watching dumbfounded at the quick change of events. Her eyes were darting back and forth between Satsuki, Akio, and Uzu, never staying on one for long.

At this point Satsuki had picked herself up from the ground as elegantly as she could and stepped towards Uzu, raising her blade as well. Akio could tell that she was more than a little pissed that he had gotten the upper hand on her, if only for the briefest of moments.

"Ryuko!"

Ryuko flinched at Akio calling out to her.

"Snap out of it."

Ryuko recovered from her initial shock and nodded, stepping towards Akio and coming to a stop beside him.

"Mako, fall back to somewhere safe," Ryuko told the girl as she raised her own blade at the two.

Mako nodded and took off, leaving as quickly as she appeared.

The two sides stared each other down, their weapons raised and raring to go. The only sound on the battlefield was the whipping of the wind that blew through the area.

"Don't try and beat her just yet," Akio whispered, not turning his head away from Uzu or Satsuki. "Just go for the glove."

Ryuko nodded and readied her blade, her legs twitching as she prepared to charge.

"Ryuko."

"What?" She replied in a hushed whisper, not taking her eyes off of Satsuki.

Akio reached into one of the pockets on his thigh, pulling out a familiar black strap of cloth.

"Here," He said softly as he placed it in her hand. "... and I'm sorry about everything."

Ryuko turned her head to Akio, a thousand thoughts racing through her mind. It was the first time the two had talked in a day now, and yet, it felt like longer. She wanted to scold him, apologize to him, hell, even just ask him how he was, but before she could do any of that Akio had already dashed forwards at Uzu.

Uzu charged forwards to meet him, his shinai poised and ready to strike.

But Uzu wasn't his target.

At the last second, Akio jumped clear over him.

Uzu brought his wooden sword to smack him out of the air, but Akio blocked it with one of his wrist blades as he flipped through the air.

The second Akio's feet touched the ground, he pounced towards Satsuki.

Satsuki watched Akio come towards her with a calm expression, not even raising her blade to try and block his strike.

Uzu materialized out of thin air in front of Akio, cutting him off from his target.

With a single strike Uzu knocked Akio several feet up and away from Satsuki.

Akio eventually fell back to the ground on his feet, growling under his breath at Uzu's interference.

"I am your opponent now, Takahiro," Uzu said as he walked towards him.

"So be it," Akio replied with an unseen grin. "Ryuko doesn't need my help anyways."

Uzu scoffed and fell into his stance, content with Akio making the first move this time.

If that's the way he wanted to play it, more power to him.

Akio charged forwards with a battle cry, bringing his arms around for a pincer strike at the Elite Four member.

"AHHHH!"

"AHHHH!"

Ryuko slammed her scissor blade downwards towards Satsuki, which she blocked easily with her Bakuzan.

"Can you take it back, Matoi?"

"Yep!"

Ryuko pushed off of Satsuki and spun around, bringing her scissor blade back around for a horizontal slash at Satsuki's midsection.

Satsuki countered the strike, but Ryuko was relentless. She sent a barrage of slashes at Satsuki's neck, shoulders, and arms, but Satsuki stopped each attack skillfully with her Bakuzan.

"Helluva defense as usual," Ryuko growled at her rival as they locked blades once more.

"Spirit is the one and only skill you have mastered. Very well, then."

Satsuki jumped back and slapped the bracer down on her arm, once again readying her Kamui for battle.

"The lioness will use all her strength, even when hunting a rabbit!" Satsuki yelled as Junketsu erupted in a flash of blue light.

Ryuko grit her teeth and took a step back, holding her red blade out in front of her. Without Senketsu, this wasn't going to be easy for her. If the two had continued to duel without Satsuki using Junketsu, Ryuko would have probably been able to get her glove back, or hell, even beat her. It was going to take some risky maneuvers to hope to best Satsuki in this state.

It wouldn't be the first time her back was to the wall.

"I won't hold back, Mato!"

Satsuki jumped forwards, opting to go on the offensive now that she had the obvious advantage.

A barrage of blows rained down on Ryuko. She did her best to block each one, but she could feel her arms grow tired with the extended use. Satsuki's strikes felt like hammers hitting her, and her speed was nearly too much to follow. Ryuko wouldn't be able to keep up much longer.

Each blow traded caused a shockwave to emanate from the striking blades, kicking up dirt and dust and causing a wind storm to rage in the area.

Satsuki took a step back and leveled her sword, lunging point first for Ryuko's abdomen.

Ryuko hopped away to avoid the stab, but she had jumped too far away and found herself at the edge of a cliff. Where such a rock formation had come from she'd never know, but with her feet on the very edge of the drop, it felt very real to her.

Satsuki walked slowly towards Ryuko, a smirk beginning to grow on her lips. The lioness had cornered her prey.

"It would appear that you cannot synchronize without this glove," Satsuki said, raising the glove in question.

"You transformed knowing that, huh?" Ryuko shot back, her sword out in front of her. "That's Satsuki Kiryuin for you! Always ruthless!"

"You challenged me, knowing you were at a disadvantage. Don't whine."

"Nobody's whining!"

"But you are shortsighted and reckless!" Satsuki cried, raising her sword to finish Ryuko off.

Ryuko set her feet, preparing herself for Satsuki's strike.

"I won't lose-"

"-to someone like you!"

Akio slammed his knee into Uzu's gut, causing the kendo master to double over, and then brought his elbow down into the back of his head.

Uzu slammed into the ground and immediately rolled away to avoid Akio's next attack.

Getting back to his feet, Uzu hopped further away, creating some distance between the two.

"Your skill has increased by a large margin," Uzu admitted as he readied his sword. "But it's still not enough to beat us."

"Then I'll settle for beating you!"

Akio charged forwards, his hands reaching to his chest to grab another handful of his limitless stock of knives.

Throwing his arms out as he ran, he flung the deadly sharp blades at Uzu, only for them to go directly through him.

"What?!"

Uzu's body disappeared into thin air, leaving no trace of the man,

Shit!

"MEN!"

The hilt of Uzu's shinai slammed into the back of Akio's head, sending him into a roll and to the ground. Why was it always the head?!

The minute Akio hit the ground, he ducked and rolled, using his hands to flip himself back onto his feet and not a moment too soon.

Uzu was already on him the minute he recovered, attacking Akio with lightning quick strikes, forcing him to retreat backwards.

Akio was able to block them with his wrist blades, but for how long he didn't know. While Akio had the upper hand in pure strength, Uzu was much, much faster than he was.

"Men! Dou! Kote!"

Akio grunted and blocked the next trio of attacks. He had to gain the upper hand soon, or else Uzu would just attack him into submission. Not only was Uzu's barrage deadly, but there was no window for Akio to strike back. Uzu's all seeing mind combined with his kendo masterly left little room for Akio to retaliate, even with his heightened reflexes.

But, of course, Uzu was striking with a wooden sword. For all the talking he did, he was still using a *wooden* sword.

Uzu brought his shinai up for another over head strike to Akio's skull.

Another flaw in Uzu's attack was that it was fairly routine, as it would be reminiscent of his kendo background. It'd be an attack to the head, the arms, or the body. While the areas in which he aimed for were varied, the general idea remained the same.

Akio raised his blades to block the strike, but it was a feint.

With a flick of his wrists Uzu changed the trajectory of his attack to Akio's defenseless ribs.

The wooden sword smacked against Akio's midsection, sending shocks all along his body.

Akio grit his teeth and endured the pain, quickly moving one hand down to trap the blade against his body, then moving the other to strike Uzu in the gut.

His fist connected, sending Uzu skidding a few feet backwards.

Using the brief opportunity, Akio ran forwards and jumped into the air, spinning his body around to deliver a vicious roundhouse kick to Uzu's head.

The strike sent Uzu flying away, his body bouncing on the ground a few times before he righted himself and landed back on his feet.

Akio took the few seconds he had to greedily suck in air, his shoulders heaving up and down rapidly with each breath. With this being his second fight today, his body was already drained. The strain his body was going through due to his uniform wasn't helping either. Regardless of how much strength these Life Fiber uniforms could give you, the human body wasn't meant to move this way for extended periods of time without the proper training that the Elite Four had.

All those hits he took to the head didn't help much either.

Akio's eyes drifted away from Uzu and to where Ryuko and Satsuki would be, his eyes widening when he caught sight of the two. It wasn't the fact that Ryuko had her back to the wall that surprised him. It was the familiar figure running towards the two, guns blazing.

"Tsumugu, you son of a bitch," Akio grinned.

It seemed that everyone was coming to play today. At least two dozen Nudist Beach DTRs had taken to the field as well.

Uzu seemed to have noticed the commotion as well, as he had already made a break towards the group.

Not to be outdone, Akio turned and sprinted in the same direction, reaching to his chest to pull out another handful of knives. He knew it was pointless to attack Uzu this way, but at this point he was only doing it to slow the green haired man.

Akio threw the knives at Uzu as they ran, and as expected, Uzu blocked them effortlessly with his shinai.

"Damn, monkey," Akio grumbled to himself, changing his direction to barrel into Uzu. "We're not finished!"

Akio planted one foot on the ground and launched himself at Uzu, raising his arms above his head to strike Uzu with all of his force as he came down.

"Hmph!"

Ira Gamagoori placed himself in front of the kendo master, bringing back his giant hand to back hand Akio away.

"Ngh!"

Gamagoori's hand connected with Akio, sending him flipping backwards through the air.

The hit itself didn't hurt all that much, but the power Gamagoori had put into his strike had sent Akio flying up and away, leaving him disoriented with no clue which way was up or down.

If anything, the fall would hurt more than the slap.

"Akio!" Ryuko cried out to him, her voice surprisingly close.

Feeling a pair of arms wrap around his chest in midair, Akio and Ryuko fell to the ground with all of the elegance of a rock.

The two hit the ground hard, Ryuko skidding on her rear across the dirt surface with Akio still in her grasp.

They finally came to a stop when Tsumugu placed his boot out, effectively stopping their slide.

"Ow..." Ryuko groaned and rubbed her backside.

"Heh," Akio chuckled nervously as he picked himself up, extending a hand to Ryuko. "Thanks for the save."

Ryuko grumbled under her breath and hoisted herself up, avoiding Akio's eyes.

Letting go of her hand, Akio glanced around at the few dozen Nudist Beach members, all in their own DTRs. Their intervention was definitely helpful, if not timely. It made sense that they'd intervene given the circumstances, but Akio was still somewhat surprised to see so many.

"Why the change of heart, Mohawk Man?" Ryuko asked the Nudist Beach operative, bringing Akio back to reality.

If Tsumugu was offended by Ryuko's choice of words, he certainly didn't show it. Hell, Tsumugu barely ever showed any emotion.

"I have no choice," Tsumugu answered. "Mikisugi asked me to back you up."

"First you attack me, then you protect me? You must keep busy."

"We have but one objective: to resist subjugation by the Life Fibers that Satsuki uses," Tsumugu replied, his eyes moving to Akio.

Tsumugu might not show that much emotion other than anger, but the disdain he held in his eyes was clear as day. Well, that was to be expected given the fact that Akio was wearing a uniform *made* by Satsuki, *made* with Life Fibers.

"That is the goal of Nudist Beach!" A familiar voice finished for him.

Akio spun on his heel towards the new voice.

"Aikuro!"

"Hello, brother," Aikuro smirked from the cockpit of his personal DTR. "I hope we're not too late to the party."

"Wait just a second, that name was for real?!"

All three men nodded in unison. Of course it was. Was it really that hard to grasp?

Ryuko's face paled when she finally caught sight of Aikuro in all of his glory. All of it was almost too much to take in for the girl.

"What... the hell are you wearing?"

"I wish I could have played the lazy teacher forever, but it looks like that's no longer possible," Aikuro explained sadly. That didn't really answer the question, but Akio decided it was best to remain quiet.

"So we've smoked out you naked fools."

Akio turned his head to where Satsuki was standing with her Elite Four right behind her.

"The true objective of the Tri-City Schools Raid Trip was to smoke out the rebel force lurking in the shadows behind the Kansai academies," Gamagoori explained with a smug grin.

Akio grit his teeth, his arms shaking with anger at his sides. Of *course* that's what they were doing it. It was too much of a coincidence that the Academy would lead an assault to the cities that had the biggest populations of Nudist Beach members.

Hopefully Aikuro took his advice regarding the headquarters.

"That is why Lady Satsuki allowed your activities to continue, Aikuro Mikisugi!" Gamagoori shouted, his eyes moving to Akio. "And you, Akio Takahiro!"

Akio only rolled his eyes at the accusation.

"Goodness, you saw through me?" Aikuro laughed. "How impressive!"

"That's a plan by Lady Satsuki for you," Inumuta joined in. "It worked exactly as planned. Well, I was the one who put it together, but still."

Why give me this uniform, then? Akio thought to himself. *If they knew my origins from day one, what benefit did that give them?*

A question for another day, he decided. There were more pressing matters to attend to. Like the Elite Four who were stepping forwards, posturing for battle.

"We were worried that you wouldn't show up and our new Goku uniforms wouldn't get any use," Nonon added, her snake-like glare moving to Akio. "It wouldn't be much fun if we had to beat up on one useless No Star."

Akio stepped forwards, raising his wrist blades.

"I'll show you useless, you foul mouthed little bi-"

"Akio," Aikuro hissed. "Let them finish. It might prove beneficial."

Akio let a puff of air out of his nostrils, but nodded nonetheless. He had a point. For some reason, the Elite Four found it necessary to explain every aspect of their plan so far.

"Do you think a group with a foolish name like Nudist Beach can thwart our grand design?" Uzu said. "Fade like the dew before my Blade Regalia MKIII!"

The four erupted in a burst of light, the three stars on their Goku uniforms shining brightly.

"Three Star Goku uniform!" The four cried as the light crashed on them.

"Shackle Regalia MKII!"

"Symphony Regalia MKII!"

"Probe Regalia MKII!"

"Blade Regalia MKIII!"

"Honnouji Academy Elite Four Regalia MKII!" The four Elites shouted in unison as the light faded away, revealing their new gold and white uniforms.

"Damn," Akio said through gritted teeth. One was hard enough, but now they had to deal with the entire four. "Ryuko, we'll deal with the Elite Four. You just worry about Satsuki."

Ryuko nodded and took a step back. She had a glove to worry about, after all.

The Nudist Beach members behind him let out a war cry and sprung forwards, their DTRs prepped and ready to go. The Elite Four charged the thirty something Nudist Beach members, letting out a battle cry of their own.

Akio took a deep breath and prepared to follow suit, readying himself for yet another battle. He could only hope that his uniform could withstand all of the pressure he was putting on it.

Explosions could already be heard in the distance as the battle got underway. Neither side was holding back this time. Ryuko had already moved to engage Satsuki once more, and from the sounds of it, things were already getting heated.

"Alright, just have to finish this up quickly."

To be honest, he was exhausted. Akio hadn't slept for nearly two days, and with all of the fighting he had done already, his body was nearing its limit, along with his uniform.

Taking one more deep breath, Akio slammed his foot into the ground, cracking the rock and leaving an indentation of his foot in the surface.

Pushing himself with all of his strength, he launched himself off the ground and to the closest Elite Four member: Nonon Jakuzure.

Nonon immediately noticed Akio flying towards her and turned her flying uniform to face him fully.

"Nice try, trash!"

The rockets on her shoulders began to glow a bright white, then let loose a barrage of heart shaped energy blasts at the oncoming Akio.

Akio shot his wrist blades downwards, embedding them into the ground and then pulling on the strings that they were attached to, using them as a makeshift grappling hook to bring himself back to the ground and out of harm's way.

The minute his feet touched the ground Akio pushed back off of it, sending himself directly back at Nonon.

"H-hey! Quit it!"

Nonon tried to fly away and dodge him, but she was too slow.

Akio barreled into Nonon in mid air, nearly causing the both of them to plummet to the surface below.

Grabbing a knife from his bandolier, Akio brought his hand back and prepared to strike one of Nonon's thrusters.

"Jakuzure!"

Akio could hear the cracking of a whip off in the distance, followed by a blunt object slamming into his ribs.

"Ngh!"

Gamagoori's whip had smacked into Akio, knocking him off of Nonon and to the ground below.

Akio hit the dirt with a thud, his instincts telling him to immediately roll to his right.

Nearly a dozen of Gamagoori's whips slammed into where Akio had once been lying, sending up an explosion of dirt and rock. If Akio had been a second slower, he would have been done for.

Akio jumped to his feet and hopped backwards, creating distance between him and the whips of Gamagoori.

"DOU!"

Uzu's shinai slammed into Akio's back, sending him directly into the storm of Gamagoori's whips.

"Gah!"

The whips smack Akio all around, back and forth, up and down.

Getting hit in the back, Akio flew upwards, only to be slammed back down into the earth by another whip.

"S-son of a bitch..." Akio cursed shakily as he picked himself out of the crater formed by his body crashing into the ground.

Uzu and Gamagoori stood before him, waiting patiently for Akio to stand back up so that they could just repeat their attack.

"I'm with you, Akio!"

A robotic leg smashed into Gamagoori's back, causing the giant to stumble forwards.

Aikuro didn't let up there. With the miniguns on his DTR's hip, he let loose a clip on Gamagoori, forcing the giant to back away.

And then, there were two.

"Looks like our fight hasn't ended yet, Takahiro," Uzu said as he brought his shinai up to grip it with both hands.

Akio panted, trying and failing to catch his breath. He was in a tough spot, but he wouldn't surrender. Not yet.

"Looks that way," Akio replied as his fallen wrist blades locked back into place.

Twisting his foot, he pounced forwards, prepared to engage the kendo master one last time.

Uzu charged forwards as well, meeting Akio in the middle.

"MEN!"

Uzu raised his shinai above his head and swung it downwards towards Akio's skull.

Akio sidestepped the blow, then brought back his fist and swung it forwards towards Uzu's chest.

Uzu hopped back to avoid the blades, then immediately charged forwards when his feet touched the ground.

"DOU!"

Uzu brought his shinai up and over his head, this time aiming for a sideways strike at Akio's ribs.

Akio jumped away, leveling his arms and aiming directly at Uzu's chest and firing his wrist blades.

Uzu smacked both of them away effortlessly, but Akio wasn't done yet.

Grabbing the strings they were attached to, he planned on repeating the same attack he had used on Satsuki.

Flinging his hands around, Akio controlled the strings, sending the blades at Uzu.

Uzu smacked both of them away again, but Akio wasn't finished. With a flick of his wrists he sent them back at his opponent.

They continued this routine for a few minutes; Akio throwing his blades at Uzu and Uzu knocking the away.

At this point, it was all Akio could seriously do. His eyes were heavy, and he could feel the fatigue wear on his brain. The strength in his muscles was draining, and he knew that he only had a little juice left in them before he gave in completely.

"Huh?"

A bright white light caught Akio's attention out of the corner of his eyes.

Akio glanced to his right, his eyes widening when he caught sight of a familiar brown haired girl, causing him to do a double take at the scene.

It was Mako alright, and she had put herself directly in-between Ryuko and Satsuki.

"MAKO?!" Akio yelled as he already moved to run to her. "GET OUT-"

Uzu's shinai slammed into Akio's head, sending him bouncing across the surface and into a pile of rubble from a fallen building.

"Hmph," Uzu huffed as he lowered his shinai and walked away. His fight was won.

"Never take your attention off of your opponent, Takahiro."

Akio coughed violently, a droplet of blood rolling down his chin. He gasped trying to catch his breath, but every time he tried to breathe in, no air came into his lungs. His chest felt like someone had lit fire to it, and his heart was beating rapidly as if that would make up for the lack of oxygen.

Oh god, am I going to die?

He coughed a few more times, a bit of blood and spit flying from his mouth. Just when he thought he was going to pass out, he felt the delicious taste of oxygen hit the back of his throat.

"Ah... ah... ah..."

Akio sucked in the air greedily, his whole body shaking with each breath.

I've got to get up.

Placing his hands on the dirt, he tried to push himself up, but his arms gave out immediately and his rear fell back on the floor, his back slamming back into the rock he was once leaning against.

"D-damn it..."

To make matters even worse, his Goku uniform had reverted back to its original state. He was surprised that he hadn't noticed it earlier, given the fact that his helmet disappearing should have been an obvious tip off, but he just attributed that to his exhaustion.

"S-sorry... Ryuko..."

He might have lost this fight, but he wouldn't lose the next. He felt slightly guilty that he wouldn't be there for his friends this time, but there was always another chance. Besides, he worked hard today. He got a lot accomplished! Maybe he could rest just this once... Ryuko and Aikuro were probably fine without him...

Akio leaned his head back on the rock. It was surprisingly comfortable. If he closed his eyes, he might just slip away...

Author's Notes:

And that's that!

Like I said, sorta short. I was actually going to write more fighting, but then it kinda felt like it was just dragging on. I mean, they'd just trade blows without really getting anywhere. And I'll be honest, writing fight scenes can be kinda dull sometimes. I actually much prefer writing dialogue and characters interacting with each other.

Still, hopefully I did the fighting justice.

Another reason that this one is sorta short is because I wanted to write Akio losing at least once. We can't win all the time, now can we?

Welp, with the next chapter, I've got some very important things planned for a certain two characters. I'm sure you can guess who...

Thanks for reading everyone!

Until next time!

Confessions in the Dark

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Before we get started, I just wanted to say a big thank you to all of you! We broke 100 reviews! A first for me as an author! Thanks a lot guys!

We got a lot of juicy things happening in this chapter, as well as an interesting change of pace! Only a part of this chapter will be told from Akio's point of view. The rest, well, I guess we'll just have to read it and find out!

I'll be honest, it felt good writing this chapter. After 130,000 words, I'm more than a little pleased to get this to you all. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Well, enough talking, and let's get to it!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

"Akio."

Akio mumbled in his sleep, pulling the blanket up to his shoulders to try and stave off whoever was trying to wake him up.

"Son, it's time to get up or else you'll be late to school."

The owner of the voice shook his shoulder a little harder this time.

"Five more minutes..." Akio muttered and buried his face into his pillow.

"You said that five minutes ago, bud. Come on, your mother's got breakfast ready."

The man reached over and flicked Akio across the nose.

"Gah!"

Akio flinched, his eyes snapping open.

"H-hey!" Akio whined as he sat up in bed and faced his father. "You didn't have to flick my nose, you know..."

Hiroshi Takahiro let out a throaty chuckle and shook his head as he stood up from his son's bed.

"Clearly, I did. This is the third time I've been in here."

"Fine, fine," Akio rolled his eyes as he threw the covers off of him and hopped out of bed. "I'm up."

"Good," His father smiled as he walked to the door. "I'll go check on your sister."

Letting out an exaggerated sigh, Akio got out of bed and followed his father out of the room, then split away and went to the bathroom down the hall.

It was a normal day for Akio Takahiro. Wake up, brush his teeth, take a shower, put on his school uniform, eat some breakfast and then go to school. Simple. Nothing that strange.

As he stepped into the shower, however, something felt off. He felt like he was forgetting something... something important. Did he have some plans he was forgetting? Maybe a homework assignment? Something was definitely off, but as to what it could be he had no clue.

"Oh, well," He shrugged as he shampooed his hair. It was probably nothing. If he couldn't remember it, it couldn't be THAT important.

Giving himself one more rinse under the shower head, Akio stepped out of the shower and grabbed a spare towel. He had to be quick today, otherwise he'd be late for school. Ah, the glories of sleeping in.

Yawning as he stepped in front of the mirror, he grabbed his toothbrush and squeezed some toothpaste on it, continuing his daily ritual.

As he brushed his teeth, his eyes moved to his reflection in the mirror.

"Wha?"

The toothbrush nearly fell out of his mouth.

With a shaky hand he reached up to his right eye, his fingers slowly tracing the three scars that went down his face.

"The fuck?"

That was not right. That wasn't right at all. None of this seemed right. The feeling that something was off only grew more and more. A feeling of dread was building in his chest, but it really shouldn't be. By all means, today should have just been a normal day.

Akio blinked and shook his head, but when he reopened his eyes the scars were still there. When the hell did that happen? And why didn't his father notice?

Turning the faucet on, he placed his hand underneath the stream of water, then brought his hand up to his face and tried to rub away the marks.

After a few seconds, the lines that he thought were scars disappeared. Strange. They definitely looked like scars, but they must have been dirt... leftover from the shower...?

"Akio? You better hurry up. School starts in an hour," His father's voice called through the door.

"A-alright," Akio replied shakily, rinsing his mouth and putting away his toothbrush. It was just dirt on his face. Nothing more.

Grabbing his uniform and slipping it on, Akio walked out of the bathroom and into the kitchen, where the smells of freshly made breakfast were wafting from.

"Morning, honey," His mother, Kasumi Takahiro, greeted with a smile as she placed his food on the table. "How're you today?"

"I'm fine," Akio answered as he took a seat at the table. "Just a little out of it is all."

"Is everything alright?" His mother asked, concern shadowing her face.

"Yeah... yeah," Akio answered absently as he stared off into space. "I just feel like I'm forgetting something."

"Hmmm," Kasumi hummed as she sat down across from him with a cup of coffee in hand. "You didn't forget your date now, did you?"

Akio blinked. "... Date?"

"Yeah," Kasumi said as she took a sip of coffee. "You said you had a date with some transfer student."

"I did?" Akio mumbled to himself and turned his head down.

"Honey..." Kasumi said and paused. "Are you alright?"

Akio nodded, lifting his head and looking back to his mother.

"Yeah, of course," He smiled. "I guess I'm just still asleep."

Kasumi returned the smile and nodded, but a hint of concern was still present in her eyes.

"Akio!"

Akiko came barreling into the room, running directly towards her big brother and climbing up into his lap as if it were in everyday thing.

"Hey there, princess," Akio grinned and tousled her hair, eliciting a giggle from his younger sibling. "Are you going to help me eat my breakfast again?"

Again?

"Yep!" Akiko answered happily as she grabbed a piece of his bacon and munched on it. "It always tastes better than mine."

Akio laughed, grabbing a slice of toast and taking a bite of it.

"Maybe I should start calling you 'little thief,' then? Seems more fitting."

Akiko shrugged, happily nibbling away at Akio's breakfast, undisturbed by her brother's comment.

"So what do you have planned today, little thief?"

"Nothing," Akiko pouted. She only had another year until she could attend kindergarten, and that fact greatly displeased her. He didn't know why she wanted to go to school so bad. Maybe it was because she wanted to be more like her older brother? Or perhaps she wanted to make some new friends.

"Maybe we can play outside later?" Akiko asked hopefully as she stared up at her brother with big, hopeful eyes. "We can take turns on the swing!"

"Of course," Akio said with a chuckle. "Although, I doubt you can actually push me."

"Akiko," Hiroshi sighed as he walked into the room, placing his hands on his hips as he looked down at his daughter. "Why don't you go eat your own breakfast?"

"No, it's fine," Akio smiled as he patted his sister's head. "I really don't mind. I'm not that hungry, anyways."

Hiroshi shrugged and walked over to his own seat, sitting down and immediately digging into his own plate of bacon and eggs.

The Takahiro family ate happily, digging into their breakfast with gusto and smiling all the way. Everyone but Akio, that is.

His eyes moved to each member of his family, his gaze lingering as he scrutinized each face and then moved on to the next. This was incredibly routine, but why did it not seem that way? It felt like this was the first time he had ever sat and ate breakfast with these people.

And why did he just refer to them as 'these people?'

"Akio."

"Yes?" Akio said as he turned his head down to his sister.

"Akio," Akiko repeated, however the sound of her voice had changed. It sounded more like...

Akio shivered as if someone had just laid a hand on his shoulder and shook him.

"Akio, wake up!"

"Akio!"

"Akio!"

Akio's eyes fluttered open, revealing nothing but a blurry darkness. The fires of the burning city illuminated the figure in front of him in an orange light, but all Akio could see of the figure was a shade of brown.

"Akiko?" Akio whispered, still slightly delirious.

"No..." The voice answered with concern. "It's Mako. Are you okay?"

Akio blinked a few more times and shook his head, the figure in front of him becoming more and more clear. It was Mako, alright. She was kneeling in front of him with a hand on his shoulder, her eyes filled with worry.

Swallowing to wet his dry throat, Akio looked past Mako and to the destruction behind her. He nearly let out a cry at the sight. The city was destroyed. The fires and smoke had reached the night sky, painting it red and black while covering the moon. That's right. This is where he was. He wasn't in some world that only a dream could fulfill. He was here in this wasteland.

"Akio?" Mako whispered and shook his shoulder.

"What..." Akio paused and licked his dry lips. "What happened?"

"Well, after Ryuko forced Lady Satsuki to a draw, Satsuki and the rest of the Elite Four left," Mako answered. "And now, everyone's just out looking for you."

"H-how are they?"

"They're fine," Mako smiled and patted his shoulder. "But, you're not. We should get you to Mr. Mikisugi."

Akio nodded, only really hearing the first part of what Mako had said. Everyone was fine. No one was injured. Him being incapacitated didn't cause any harm to anyone. Thank goodness.

"Help me up."

Mako nodded and stood, looping her arm under Akio's armpit and pulling him to his feet.

Akio winced as he stood, his vision blurring once more. His entire body ached and his legs felt like jelly. If Mako wasn't here supporting him as he stood, he'd probably fall right back down on his ass.

Slowly, Akio let go of Mako, trusting that his own two feet could keep him up. They trembled a bit, but they wouldn't give out on him yet.

Akio took a deep breath, trying to regain his senses. Before he got any rest, there was something he needed to do.

"Thank you, Mako," Akio said as he walked past her.

"Wait," Mako blinked, her head following him. "Where are you going?"

"I've got to check something," Akio replied as he kept walking.

"Then I'll come with you!"

Akio stopped, turning his head down.

"I'm sorry, but I have to do this... Alone."

"Akio..." Mako whined and stomped her foot a few times.

Akio started walking again, eventually limping out of sight.

Mako puffed out her cheeks as she watched her friend walk away. She wanted to follow him to make sure he was alright, but then again, she also wanted to follow his request. He had left abruptly, so something was clearly on his mind. Something that he wanted to deal with alone. But then again, he looked pretty banged up when she found him. He probably shouldn't be alone right now.

"Oh, what to do, what to do..."

"Did you find him?" Ryuko asked, her eyes scanning the dirt and rubble around her.

"No," Aikuro replied and kicked a stray rock. "Damn it, where is he?"

"Hmph," Tsumugu walked off to the side and sat down on a boulder. "We don't have time for this. If he's alive, he'll know where we're at. He can meet us there. If he's-"

Ryuko raised her scissor blade, the point of it aimed directly at Tsumugu's neck.

"If you value breathing, you *really* don't want to finish that sentence, Mohawk Man."

Tsumugu exhaled slowly, not frightened in the least by the death threat. This wouldn't have been the first time the man lost a fellow comrade in the field. Ryuko needed to understand that not everything would always end nicely, but it wasn't really his job to tell her that. It was told through experience. So he elected to remain silent.

"I know where he is," Senketsu stated calmly.

"What?!" Ryuko exclaimed and looked down at her sailor uniform. "Why didn't you say something earlier?!"

"Because, I couldn't sense him. Now, I can, albeit very slightly."

Ryuko rose an eyebrow. "Since when the hell can you-"

"Guys! Guys!"

Mako ran on to the scene, waving her hands around frantically as she sprinted to Ryuko.

"Mako?"

"Ryuko!"

Mako stopped in front of her friend, putting her hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

"Spit it out, Mankanshoku," Aikuro said as he walked over to the duo. "Is something wrong? Did you find Akio?"

"Hmhm," Mako nodded as she straightened back up. "And that's the thing, he kinda just walked off."

"What?!" Aikuro exclaimed. "And why didn't you follow him?"

"He told me not to! I wanted to, but he specifically said he had to do something alone."

Aikuro sighed and ran a hand through his hair, closing his eyes as he thought.

"Fine. Do you at least know where he went?"

Mako shook her head.

"That idiot," Ryuko grumbled to herself as she turned and walked off. "I'll go find him and bring him back."

"That's probably for the best," Aikuro sighed again.

Walking over to her discarded motorcycle, Ryuko picked it off the ground and turned it on, revving the engine a few times to make sure it didn't get too damaged in the conflict.

"So, you can find him, Senketsu?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Ryuko kicked her foot off the ground as the motorcycle shot forwards, the two of them riding off to the destination that Senketsu had set out for her.

Ryuko glanced around at the suburban neighborhood she had just walked into, raising an eyebrow skeptically. The houses were all western, and most of them were two stories, some even three. The lawns were colored a luscious green, with even a few sprinklers going off to water the grass. The trees that spotted the neighborhood stood tall and proud, their branches overflowing with green leaves.

Compared to the barren wasteland she had just walked out of, this place was bursting with life. Except for the fact that not a person could be seen.

And knowing that, this just didn't look like the place Akio would go to right now. Why would he come here?

"Are you sure he's here, Senketsu?"

"Yes," Her partner replied. "He's here. I can sense him."

"How is that possible, anyways?" Ryuko asked as she looked around at the fancy homes. "Can you sense other people like Mako, too?"

"... No," Senketsu answered after a brief pause, a hint of regret entering his tone. "I can sense Akio because I have tasted his blood."

"Excuse me?" Ryuko stopped walking to look down at Senketsu.

"When did you-"

Ryuko stopped herself, her expression immediately darkening. Right. *That* day.

He would have tasted a lot more of it if Ryuko hadn't been able to stop herself.

Nope. No. Not right now.

Shaking her head, Ryuko rid herself of those thoughts and continued walking down the empty street.

"See? I told you."

Ryuko turned her head to the left, seeing a familiar figure standing in the driveway of one of the suburban houses. Thanks to the street lights and the lights of the homes, she could easily tell that it was in fact Akio. He was still wearing his Goku uniform, but it wasn't activated anymore. The jacket was unzipped and wrinkled to all hell, and his pants were covered in dirt and other stains that Ryuko didn't really want to know about. His hair was more disheveled than normal and the bags under his eye were visible from here, even with the poor lighting.

To be blunt, he looked like hell. She had never seen him look so ragged before.

And yet, he was smiling, as if he was relieved by the sight before him.

Ryuko furrowed her brow and walked over to a nearby tree, hiding behind it. From this distance she could see Akio clearly, yet she couldn't be seen unless he looked hard enough.

"Spying?" Senketsu sighed. "You know you could just ask him what he's doing."

"Shhh," Ryuko hushed him. "I will, but I just want to see what he's doing first. Sue me."

Senketsu rolled his eye, but didn't say anything more.

Still smiling, Akio walked into the yard and bent down to run his hand through the green grass. After a few seconds of fondling the ground, he stood back up and walked over to the tree that had a tire swing on one of the branches and ran his hand across the surface of the tire as if to commit its feel to memory.

"What's he doing?"

"You could ask him."

Ryuko ignored Senketsu's remark, keeping her eyes glued on their friend.

He had moved behind the tire swing and gave it a soft push, and then another when it came back to him.

He was pushing an empty swing?

And yet, the smile that was plastered on his face grew even more.

Ryuko gasped softly. As long as she had known him, he had never looked as happy or content as he did right now, save for when Ryuko had recovered from her rampage at the arena.

In the few months where she was just getting to know him, it seemed that every smile he had ever put on was reserved, as if he was holding something back. It was like he didn't want to let that side of him show, or was just too afraid to.

She couldn't exactly say she blamed him for it, though. Ryuko had been guilty of that as well at one point. There wasn't much happiness for her in the first few months after her father's death. In fact, as fucked up as it sounded, being at Honnouji Academy has been the most fun she's found in the entire year. Hell, it might have been the most fun she's *ever* had, even with all of the crazy idiots and the big eyebrow bitches.

That wasn't always the case for Akio, obviously, but Ryuko could swear that it was when she was just getting to know him. Actually, these past few weeks there had been a change and Akio had seemed a lot more outgoing than before. It was nice.

Akio's sigh of contentment brought Ryuko back to reality.

"At least I accomplished something of importance," Akio said and pushed the swing again. "Maybe I'll be pushing you on here one day, Akiko."

Ryuko rose an eyebrow. Akiko?

Adjusting her body to get a better view, Ryuko stepped on a twig.

Shit.

Akio snapped his head over to where she was hiding, his smile vanishing completely.

"Who's there?! Show yourself!"

"Heh," Ryuko chuckled nervously as she stepped out from behind the tree, rubbing the back of her head. "Hey."

Akio exhaled slowly, his features relaxing as Ryuko came into view.

"Ryuko, what are you doing here?"

The girl in question frowned. That wasn't much of a greeting.

"You vanished, remember?"

"Oh, right," Akio replied and looked around tiredly. "Sorry, I had to check on something."

"So I can see," Ryuko said as she walked towards him. She actually had *a lot* she wanted to talk to him about, but her gut told her not to jump into it yet; and now that she was actually here, she didn't find herself all that angry. She was just relieved that he was alive and breathing.

Plus, maybe Senketsu had been right the other day. Maybe there was something else going on that she just wasn't aware of. Besides, it was simply nice to actually be able to talk to the man she had grown so close to for the first time in a few days.

And he *did* apologize.

Akio looked pointedly at her, as if he expected her to say something more as well. Damn, was she really that predictable? Maybe she should do something about her quick temper...

"What are you doing here, anyways?"

Akio's eyes narrowed and turned to the ground, avoiding Ryuko's gaze.

"If it's something you don't want to talk about, that's fine," Ryuko backpedaled.

"No, you deserve to know," Akio replied and looked back at her. "It's only fair, considering I didn't give you much of an explanation the other day."

Akio sighed and sat down on the grass, but it looked more like his legs had finally gave out on him.

"This house has something to do with your coming to Osaka?" Ryuko asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. This house belongs to Kasumi and Hiroshi Takahiro, and their daughter Akiko Takahiro," Akio answered and looked up at Ryuko. "My family's home."

Ryuko's eyes widened, her jaw slowly dropping. His parents lived in Osaka? He had a sister? This was their home?

That meant... Oh. Oh, god.

Well, now she felt like the biggest asshole on the planet. The reason he came to Osaka was for his family... Even a blind monkey could figure that much out. Senkestu was probably having a field day with this. If she looked down at her sailor uniform right now, he'd probably be looking at her with an 'I told you so' look.

Shit, she really did jump to conclusions.

"Oh," Ryuko mumbled and looked away sheepishly.

"Don't worry," Akio chuckled, causing Ryuko to look back to him.

"You didn't know, and I didn't exactly explain myself well. If anything, it's my fault for causing the strife between us."

Ryuko blinked. How did he know what she was thinking?

"I'd honestly rather just forget about it at this point," Ryuko sighed as she sat down across from him. "We both weren't in the best frames of mind."

"Well said," Akio smirked. "I'd love nothing more."

Akio sighed and laid back on the grass, spreading his arms out and staring at the leaves of the tree above him.

"And an answer to your earlier question, I'm here because I wanted to make sure this place was still standing."

Ryuko tilted her head to the side, pursing her lips.

"When we talked before, it sounded like you didn't like your parents that much?"

"They're alright," Akio replied, his smile nearly audible in his tone.

"Besides, what kind of older brother would I be if I didn't stand up for my little sister?"

"It sounds like you really like them," Ryuko noted with a smile.

Akio didn't respond, content to just stare up at the leaves above him.

The two sat in silence for a few minutes, both of them just enjoying the night air. When Ryuko thought that maybe Akio had just fallen asleep, she leaned over and glanced at him. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was set in a firm line as if he was thinking something

over. Occasionally he'd take a deep breath, and then slowly exhale. Maybe he did fall asleep. Or he passed out. Either way, Ryuko would have to carry him back.

Ryuko sighed and fell back on her rear, propping herself up with her arms. She supposed they could stay here a little while longer.

"When I found you passed out on that rooftop, beaten to a pulp with Senketsu torn apart."

Ryuko blinked at Akio and rose an eyebrow.

"Huh?"

Akio's hands grabbed at the grass, tearing up the dirt.

"I vowed I wouldn't let it happen again," Akio continued as if he were talking more to himself than to Ryuko. "I won't sit on the sidelines while my best friend is in danger. Not again."

"Akio..."

Frankly, a part of Ryuko was miffed and wanted to scold him for thinking such a thing. She wasn't a child who needed babysitting. She could take care of herself, thank you very much.

But a much larger part of her was truly touched. There weren't many people in her life that would say such a thing to her and actually mean it. Hell, there was really only two, and Mako wasn't much of a fighter.

Also, it seemed that Akio really had something he wanted to say, so Ryuko elected to be quiet as he spoke.

"That's why I took this blasted thing," Akio said as he flicked one of the three silver stars on his shoulder. "So that the next time you needed my help, I'd be able to stand with you without being a liability."

"You really need to get some sleep if that's what you think," Ryuko scoffed, but smiled nonetheless. "You were never a liability."

Akio snorted and shook his head tiredly.

"I could never stand up to someone like Satsuki or Nui Harime. I still might not be able to, given how today went, but at least now I have a chance."

Slowly, a frown began to form on Ryuko's face as she took everything in. As this whole conversation played out, a thought had struck her, and had begun to slowly gnaw away at her heart. How could she not have noticed it earlier? It was all so clear now.

"... Akio?"

"Yes?"

"Why don't you ever fight for yourself?"

Akio remained quiet.

As Ryuko thought about it, more and more instances of this came to her mind. As long as she had known him, he had only fought for others, and never himself. Hell, he even took that damn Goku uniform not because he personally wanted it, but because he thought it might be beneficial to others, namely herself. Now, there's nothing wrong with fighting for another, but at some point you need to start looking out for yourself.

"Even at the very beginning, before you even knew me, you put yourself in danger to fight that boxing club weirdo. Even when you fought Sanageyama the first time, you didn't do it for yourself. You did it for others. Even today, you fought Kiryuin just so you could get that glove for me."

"What's your point?"

"Why..." Ryuko paused, her hands clenching at the dirt. "Why are you so selfless? Do you not care about yourself?"

"..."

It was quiet for a moment, and just when Ryuko thought that Akio didn't have an answer for her, he laughed.

"What's so damn funny?" Ryuko growled, more than a little annoyed at his response. This was serious. Why would he laugh at that?

"You've got it wrong, Ryuko," Akio spoke after he finished laughing. Sitting up, he met Ryuko's blue eyes and smiled softly. "In a way, I am fighting for myself. If I can make the person I love happy, then that makes me happy. That's more than enough for me."

Wait. Wait just a second.

Ryuko blushed furiously, her jaw dropping at what Akio had just said and the way in which he had said it.

Was... was that a...

Did he really just...

He was probably just being vague. That's it. He most definitely meant *all* of the people he loved, in a platonic, friendly way. Not just her. He's so tired that he probably didn't realize what he had said. He probably didn't mean it the way she was thinking.

But the way he had said it while looking directly at her...

"D-did, uh, did you just..."

Akio continued to smile, completely oblivious to what he had just said.

"What? Did I say something-"

Akio blinked a few times, his smile slowly disappearing as his brow furrowed in thought. It seemed that the scope of what he had just said had finally caught up to him.

"Oh. *Oh*. "

Akio bit his bottom lip and scratched at his cheek.

"I, I probably could have done that better..." Akio mumbled to himself.

Ryuko continued to stare wide eyed at him, her heart skipping a beat. He... he really meant it. The idiot actually meant it.

"Ha, I knew it," Senketsu chuckled to himself.

"Shut up!"

"Yeah, yeah, that's probably a good idea," Akio gushed as he nodded excessively. "I'm exhausted and not really thinking clearly, so yeah, just forget I said anything and we can just go back to-"

"No!" Ryuko shouted and pointed a finger at him. "Not you! You... you just sit there and let me think!"

Akio trapped his mouth shut and nodded a few more times.

Oh, god, he meant it. Not in a friendly way, not in brother-sister kind of way, but in a...

Ryuko gulped. The butterflies in her stomach were at full force now. Anxiety was beginning to build in her chest, but it was an anxiety she was unfamiliar with. One she had never experienced before. It left her feeling giddy and lightheaded. It was... nice. Amazing, even.

Ryuko Matoi had a talking sailor uniform that she was partners and friends with, half of a scissor that she used to fight people, and lived in a world where people wore uniforms to gain inhuman power, but this, this was something she had never experienced before.

Judging from the flustered look on Akio's face, it was something he had never done before, either.

"Did..." Ryuko swallowed, hoping to wet her completely dry throat. "Did you mean that just now?"

"Mean what?"

"Akio!"

Akio exhaled slowly and ran a hand over his face, his previous nervousness being replaced with fiery determination and resolve. Ryuko was almost envious, really. It's like he flipped some switch or something.

"Yes, yes I did mean it," He replied with surprising calmness. "While I wasn't exactly planning to say that tonight, I still meant it."

Akio's green eyes met Ryuko's blue ones for the first time since his confession. His expression was warm and genuine, but there was still a hint of worry in his eyes.

"Do you... feel the same?"

"..."

Ryuko turned her head down, letting her bangs cover her eyes.

She should say no. First and foremost, she had a duty to complete. She couldn't afford to get caught up in some silly young love that might end poorly. She had to avenge her father. She had to beat Satsuki, and beat Nui Harime as well. God forbid, what if a day came when she had to choose between Akio and the mission she had been on for the past year?

Ryuko frowned. Well, that was a stupid question.

"Yes," She breathed, fiddling with her hands in her lap and avoiding Akio's gaze.

With Ryuko returning Akio's feelings, they both sat quietly, neither daring to move an inch. The only sound that could be heard was their soft breathing and the sound of some crickets off in the distance.

Ryuko didn't even want to think about what Senketsu was thinking right now. Just having him witness this entire thing with his silent gaze was embarrassing enough.

The quiet stillness was interrupted by the crunching of the dirt and grass as Akio slowly made his way over to her, and soon enough his hands had invaded her vision as they gently took a hold of each of her own.

"I'm glad to hear that."

Ryuko slowly looked up at the grinning man before her. His warm, loving smile proved contagious, as before she knew it, Ryuko found herself returning the smile. Funnily enough, she didn't feel so nervous anymore. It was like someone had removed the weight from her shoulders that she didn't even know was there in the first place.

"That's it?" Ryuko replied cheekily. "'I'm glad?' I'm spilling my guts out over here, and that's all you've got? For someone with such a sensitive and girly side, I was expecting a few tears or something. A poem at the least. In fact, I would have settled for a haiku."

"You literally gave me a one word reply," Akio shot back with a smirk. "For someone who says whatever they're thinking with no filter, I was expecting something similar to a speech about your undying love for me."

"I'll give you an entire monologue when you show me some of your slick dance moves," Ryuko countered, ignoring the burning in her cheeks.

"You really shouldn't have made that bet," Akio grinned devilishly.

"Wait," Ryuko blinked, her smile disappearing. "It was just a joke, I swear, you don't have to-"

Akio rose to his feet, pulling Ryuko up by her hands.

"You better start writing your speech," Akio said as he took her hands in his.

"Damn it, man," Ryuko grumbled with a smile. "I knew I shouldn't have mentioned the dancing. You just can't help yourself."

"You think you'd know better by now," Akio laughed as he moved his leg to start the dance.

"Ngh!"

The minute he put all of his weight on it, he collapsed to the dirt floor, nearly dragging Ryuko with him.

"Akio!" Ryuko exclaimed as she fell on her knees beside him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Akio grunted as he pushed himself back into a seated position. "I'm just really exhausted from today. I guess my body finally had enough."

"And you thought it would be a good idea to do some light cardio?"

"Not my finest moment," Akio mumbled sheepishly.

"Can you walk?"

"... Probably?"

"You're an idiot," Ryuko sighed as she looped his arm around her neck. "My bike isn't too far off. I'll carry you there."

The two slowly made it back to their feet, swaying dangerously but not falling over.

"Oh, my knight in shining armor!" Akio said as he pretended to swoon. "Will you at least carry me there bridal style?"

"What? No!"

Akio let out a dejected sigh, but nodded nonetheless.

The two slowly made their way down the street and in the direction where Ryuko had parked her motorcycle.

"Hey, Ryuko?"

"Yes?" Ryuko replied as she glanced over at Akio, whose face was only inches away from hers now.

"I really did mean what I said back there. And thank you."

Ryuko blinked, but before she could even reply Akio had closed the distance between the two, softly pressing his lips to hers, causing her heart to skip another beat.

After a few seconds he broke away, and that damn smile he was wearing when she had first found him was plastered on his face once more.

That bastard had caught her off guard once again.

Ryuko's cheeks began to burn once more, and she purposefully looked away to hide her blush as she began to forcefully lead him down the sidewalk.

"Let's just get you back to the others before you pass out in my arms."

"Sounds like a plan."

The two continued to walk out of the neighborhood, both of them smiling like they didn't have a care in the world.

Looking over at Akio to make sure he wasn't watching her, Ryuko brought a hand up to her lips, slowly brushing her fingers across where Akio's lips had once been.

Her smile widened.

This was certainly going to be a new experience for her, and as Mako had put it, you truly aren't living if you don't experience everything at least once.

Author's notes:

And there you have it!

Ah, I won't lie. It felt so good to write this chapter. I've had this story planned to have an OC x Ryuko romance since the beginning, so it was nice to finally finalize it. You know, I actually toyed with the idea of having Akio getting together with Satsuki at one point, but I just couldn't turn my back on Ryuko like that. I've had too much fun writing her and Akio.

It's not every day you get to write fluffy stuff like this. Hopefully I didn't make Ryuko too OOC. I mean, underneath it all, she's still just a normal person. There isn't much out there that can trump the feeling of having your love reciprocated for the very first time.

Knowing what happens down the road, I wonder how Ryuko and Akio's relationship will play out... I mean, I know of course, but I still wonder...

Anyhow, thanks for reading guys and gals! I hope you enjoyed this chapter as much as I did. I'll be honest, I haven't exactly written a ton of confession scenes such as this before, so I hope I did it justice.

Until next time!

Look to the Present

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Thanks for the overwhelming praise of last chapter guys! I'm extremely happy you all enjoyed it. Ryuko x Akio was something I had planned since the beginning, so finally writing it and seeing it so greatly enjoyed was like music to my ears. A dream come true!

Well, if you liked last chapter, I got some more for you here. I decided to throw a buffer chapter in before we got back to the episode where everything is explained to Ryuko. There's also another reason why I wanted to add some fluffier moments...

Yay! More fluff!

Hope you all enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Akio yawned, hugging himself a little closer to Ryuko as she drove. It was quite possible that he could fall asleep here, and on the back of a motorcycle of all places. Falling off the back of a moving vehicle was on the long list of things Akio wanted to avoid in his life time. Ryuko did say she would go fairly slow, but falling off of a 'fairly slow' motorcycle onto the rough asphalt was not what Akio planned to do with his day.

So, whenever he felt himself fading, he'd pinch himself or bite his tongue. It worked alright, he supposed. Couldn't say he enjoyed it.

At least Ryuko's back was comfortable, and the wind blowing through his hair was quite pleasant...

The bike suddenly came to stop, its tires screeching against the asphalt.

Akio nearly jumped out of his skin at the sudden stop, and in turn nearly fell off the back of the bike. Thankfully, his hold around Ryuko's waist was pretty much a vice grip at this point, and Ryuko had snaked a hand around to his back to make sure he didn't fall.

"Hey, Akio. There was something I wanted to ask you before we meet up with the others."

"What's up?"

Ryuko turned her head to him, her cobalt eyes meeting his green ones.

"What should we tell them?"

Akio blinked. "Tell them?"

"Yeah, you know," Ryuko began awkwardly as she waved a hand around. "What should we tell them about us?"

"Ah," Akio nodded. "Well, it's not really anyone's business that we're together now, so I say we just keep it to ourselves. What do you think?"

"Hmmm."

Ryuko pursed her lips and scratched her cheek with her index finger, purposefully avoiding his gaze. She obviously had a different view on the matter.

"Yes?" He prompted.

"Don't you think we should at least tell Mako?" Ryuko asked. "I mean, she's like a sister to me. It just feels wrong to keep something like this from her after all she's done for me."

That made sense. Mako was a big part of her life, and he couldn't exactly tell her no when she worded it like that. Mako deserved to know, he supposed... And at least Ryuko was getting more used to the idea of being in a relationship. It was new grounds for both of them, so it was relieving to hear her talk it without getting seriously flustered or embarrassed. To be fair, Akio had had the same feelings at first, but he was much better at hiding it. Ryuko, on the other hand... well, she often wore her heart on her sleeve, so it was definitely relieving to hear her talk about it calmly.

"Alright, that makes sense," Akio agreed as a smile broke out on his face. "But you have to be the one to tell her."

"Why wouldn't I?" Ryuko replied, raising an eyebrow at the cheeky grin on his face.

"No reason."

Yeah, have fun with that one. Akio thought to himself as he repressed a snicker.

"There you two are!"

Akio and Ryuko both perked their heads up, seeing Aikuro and Mako walking towards them. Dismounting from the motorcycle, Ryuko and Akio made their way towards them to meet them halfway.

Well, only Aikuro was walking. Mako, well...

"There you are!" Mako shouted as she ran up to Akio, ensnaring him in a bear hug.

Akio wheezed, Mako's near tackle taking the breath from him.

"Hey, Mako," He choked out, weakly hugging her back.

Mako broke from the hug, giving Akio a very angry frown, then flicked him in the forehead.

"Ow!" Akio exclaimed and rubbed his poor head. "What was that for?"

"For walking off, you dummy!" Mako scolded, flicking Akio a few more times.

"H-hey, cut it out!" Akio cried as he tried to knock Mako's hands away, but she was much, much faster than him. Surprisingly so...

Ryuko held a hand up to her mouth to hide her snickering, content with watching the scene unfold instead of intervening.

Aikuro walked up to Akio, placing his hands on his hips as he frowned disapprovingly at his younger brother. His glare was a lot more menacing than Mako's.

"Are you going to flick me, too?" Akio sighed, resigned to his fate.

"No."

Aikuro raised his hand, slapping Akio hard in the back of the head.

"H-hey!" Akio cried once more as he rubbed his head gingerly. "What was that for?!"

"For walking off without telling any of us first. You had us all worried sick, you know."

Akio blinked. "Even Tsumugu?"

"Well, no not really," Aikuro admitted with a smirk.

Akio rolled his eyes. Big surprise. The two of them never really got along that well. Probably even less, now.

"I hate to interrupt all of the fun we're having," Ryuko interrupted.
"But what do we do now? You promised me some answers, Mikisugi."

"That's right, I did," Aikuro nodded as he turned to walk away.
"Follow me."

"So much for a tearful reunion," Akio grumbled as he walked after his brother, rubbing the various bruises on his head caused by the onslaught of flicks and the single slap.

Ryuko and Mako jogged after him, falling into step once they had caught up.

"Where are we going?" Ryuko asked.

Akio glanced over at her, a sly smile slowly growing on his face.

"Our base of operations, of course."

Nearly half an hour later, the four found themselves in front of a canal, with Tsumugu already there and waiting on him.

Akio huffed and puffed as he tried to keep up with everyone, his breaths coming in quick, ragged gasps. He didn't exactly get that much of a rest when he was on the bike with Ryuko. His legs were basically jello at this point.

"This is your base?" Ryuko mumbled while she looked around.
"Looks like shit."

"This is a canal, Ryuko," Akio sighed tiredly. "So, no, this isn't our base. This is just the entrance."

Ryuko nodded, still glancing around. "Fancy entrance to a base."

Aikuro climbed up atop the levee where Tsumugu was standing, keeping his back to the trio below as he stared out at the murky and

rubble-ridden water.

Akio frowned, pointedly looking away from his brother. He was in his Nudist Beach get up, so he wasn't exactly wearing any clothes. Well, he actually was wearing *no* clothing, and just a small belt that hid his more private parts. The purple glow that emitted from his rear and front still made no sense to him, either. How can you get a purple light to glow there? Akio had been wondering that for years.

Akio shook his head. A conundrum for another time.

"Ryuko," Aikuro began, keeping his backside to her. "You fought Satsuki Kiryuin to a draw. That was impressive."

Akio sneaked a peak over at Ryuko and Mako, but made it brief so he didn't catch anything he didn't want to see.

Mako was staring wide eyed at Aikuro, her mouth gaping open. Ryuko, on the other hand, was staring directly at him, not fazed in the slightest. This wasn't her first rodeo, after all.

But still...

"H-hey!" Akio hissed, poking Ryuko in the arm. "Don't look directly at it!"

Ryuko gave an exaggerated eye roll and very deliberately looked away.

"Come with me," Aikuro continued as he took a step towards the water.

"Hey, Mikisugi!" Ryuko called out to him, only peeking at him. "Where are you going?"

"It's just like Satsuki Kiryuin said. The situation has shifted," Aikuro explained as he spread out his arms. "Now that it's come to this, it's pointless to keep things hidden. It's now time to show you everything."

"Wording," Akio sighed as he placed a hand over his eyes. "Wording, brother."

Ryuko strode forwards, totally oblivious to the somewhat questionable wording of Aikuro's statement. After a few seconds, Akio followed along.

It was time to get this show on the road.

"Mako," Ryuko stopped, turning her head back to her. "This time, you're going home for real."

Akio quirked an eyebrow, looking back and forth from Ryuko to Mako. He couldn't say he was surprised, but he knew from firsthand experience that Mako was just as stubborn as Ryuko was. He wasn't expecting her to go down without a fight.

It made perfect sense for her to leave. Mako had no fighting experience, and quite frankly wasn't cut out for it. She was quite the liability on the battlefield, and could even get herself killed if she wasn't careful.

But, then again, Akio really loved her being around. She was calming to him, funnily enough. With all of the crazy and insane things going on, it was nice to see that Mako was still Mako. She hadn't changed a bit, and that fact reassured Akio that things were going to be alright in the end.

To be honest, he almost wished that she'd stay with them. He felt better knowing that he could at least keep an eye on her if she was with them. Plus, he just enjoyed her company.

Mako only blinked at Ryuko's words, not saying anything.

"Mankanshoku, if you follow, it will mean throwing yourself headlong into a whirlpool of battle," Aikuro added. "Do you possess that resolve?"

Mako held up a hand, stopping him.

"I don't."

Akio deflated slightly, but that might be for the best. He couldn't exactly ensure her safety, anyways. Maybe he was just being selfish by wanting her to stick around.

"Figured as much," Ryuko replied, smiling slightly. "Go on home."

"I'm not prepared to go around buck-naked just yet!" Mako declared.

Akio's eyes widened. Well, that was somewhat unexpected.

"You mean that?!"

"Is it that surprising to you?" Akio mumbled over to Ryuko.

"But what I do have is the desire to be Ryuko's friend through thick and thin! So, I'm coming with you!"

Akio's surprise quickly dissolved into a warm smile. That's exactly why they needed her around. Mako was just so damn honest and lovable, she quite literally cheered everyone up with her presence.

"Mako..."

"Alright then," Aikuro nodded and turned back to the water. "Come with us!"

"Kay!"

Akio blinked. Somehow, somehow, Mako was already up there with Tsumugu and Aikuro, and all three were prepared to dive into the water.

"How...?"

"Huh? Mako?"

Apparently Ryuko was as dumbstruck by the incredible feat as well.

All three dove into the water without hesitation, leaving Ryuko and Akio behind.

"Ryuko," Aikuro looked back at her before completely going under. "This is the entryway to the truth you must know. Let's go skinny dipping!"

Aikuro spun around, backflopping into the water and disappearing beneath the muddied surface.

Ryuko stared dumbly at the water, still shocked at the rapid change of events.

"Wha?"

Akio climbed up beside her on the levee, leaning over the side so that he could get a clear look at the water below. Well, it was dirtied and filled with various rocks and other rubble, but it shouldn't be a problem when he dove in, as long as he avoided it.

Ryuko glanced over at Akio.

"Go on ahead," He replied to her look. "I'll be right behind you."

Ryuko nodded and ran forwards, plugging her nose and cannonballing into the water.

Akio sighed as he watched her disappear beneath the water, then rose his head and looked at the destroyed city around him.

"At least we're still alive," Akio mumbled to himself before he dove into the water after them.

A few minutes later, the five of them resurfaced inside of the ruins of the Nudist Beach base.

Mako and Ryuko gasped for air, while Tsumugu, Aikuro, and Akio only breathed in and out silently. It was part of the Nudist Beach training to be able to hold your breath for extended periods of time, so the three of them had a much greater lung capacity than the other two.

All five of them made their way towards the destroyed base, climbing out of the water and towards the wreckage.

"There was a cavern under like this under Osaka?" Ryuko asked as Senketsu shook himself dry, while Mako had to resort to actually shaking herself dry.

"Yes," Akio nodded as he looked around. "It was the perfect spot for a secret base, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Ryuko replied as the five began to walk through the ruins. "It's pretty busted up though, huh?"

"Jakuzure did a number on it," Aikuro agreed. "But this isn't all there is to our base."

"It's not?"

"Nope," Akio motioned with his head towards a steel door that had the Nudist Beach insignia on it. "Not by a long shot."

The door slid apart as the five walked up to it, revealing a shiny, steel covered hallway with a bright light at the end.

As they walked through the light, they found themselves in another cavern, but this one was untouched by Nonon Jakuzure.

"Holy..." Ryuko trailed off as she looked around wide eyed.

It really was quite the site. In an essence, it looked sort of like a beach. The steel floor they were walking on had turned into sand, and in the center of the cavern was another body of water that led to

the outside. Several docks led into the water, and the sandy beach even had a few umbrellas and towels laid across the ground.

It was quite literally a nudist beach.

Behind the beach front was a set of houses and warehouses, used to home the Nudist Beach operatives as well as hold any equipment they might need.

Off to the left stood a giant tower made of steel, similar looking to that of the Eiffel Tower. In the center of it held the words 'Nudist Beach.'

It really was quite beautiful, and left untouched by the rampage above.

"Mr. Mikisugi, Mr. Takahiro, Mr. Kinagase!"

A dozen Nudist Beach members materialized out of thin air in front of the five, all of them saluting their superiors.

"Mister?" Ryuko prompted, glancing over at Akio. "I thought you were just an undercover guy?"

"I was," Akio nodded. "But before I quit, I was third in command of the organization, only behind Tsumugu and Aikuro."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously, although it doesn't hold true anymore."

Aikuro examined the surrounding cavern, nodding in satisfaction and then turned to his subordinates.

"This section made it through unscathed, huh?"

"It was the right call for us to evacuate as you ordered, sir," The man in front replied.

"I can't take all the credit," Aikuro smirked. "But it's nice to know that being a worrywart sometimes pays off."

Another dozen Nudist Beach members appeared on the scene, lining up on each side of Ryuko, Akio, and Mako, all of them giving the trio a salute. The men and women formed a makeshift hallway around the three, which if Akio was being totally honest, was somewhat suffocating since they were all basically naked.

"It's good to see that you are safe and sound, Mr. Takahiro," One of the woman called out to him. She looked somewhat familiar, but he just couldn't place her name.

"Yes, well," Akio replied, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. It seemed that no one had informed them that he wasn't Nudist Beach anymore. "It wasn't that easy, mind you. Thankfully I have some amazing friends."

The woman nodded, her hand still on her forehead in a salute. Well, if no one had told them, he certainly wasn't. It was nice being called 'Mr. Takahiro.'

"H-hey!" Ryuko hissed and poked him hard in the shoulder. "Just what the hell do you think you're looking at?"

Akio rolled his eyes and deliberately looked to the ceiling and away from the woman he was just talking with. It seemed that the shoe was on the other foot, now.

"This Nudist Beach deal of yours sure must cost a lot of money," Ryuko said to Aikuro once she was satisfied that Akio's gaze was averting the female Nudist Beach members.

"Your father saw to that," Aikuro answered.

"My dad?"

"He is the founder of Nudist Beach, you know," Akio interjected, his eyes still on the ceiling above him.

"He was," Aikuro tagged on. "And he was an amazing scientist, as well. Thanks to all the patents he held, he cobbled together money from companies all over the world. Using those funds, he was able to create this organization."

Ryuko's eyes widened.

"My dad really founded this pervy cesspool?"

"That's right!" Aikuro exclaimed, extending his arms to the heavens as the purple glow that emitted from his nether regions brightened. "It was your father, Dr. Isshin Matoi who founded Nudist Beach!"

Mako, who had been gawking at the crowd of naked men and women, gasped. She obviously had a different idea on what the term 'Nudist Beach' meant.

"I don't think that's what he meant, Mako," Ryuko sighed.

"How did you know what was going on inside of my head?!" Mako gasped again. "That's amazing, Ryuko! You're a friend who's both inside and outside my head!"

Akio smiled at the two as they went back and forth, unaware that Aikuro had walked up behind him.

"So, Akio," Aikuro spoke and placed a hand on his shoulder. "How are you holding up?"

Akio flinched at the sudden contact, but quickly reeled himself in and faced his older brother.

"Well, things seem to be moving quickly now, but all things considered I'm doing pretty good," Akio answered truthfully. "Granted, I'm tired as hell, but pretty good nonetheless."

"Glad to hear it," Aikuro grinned and patted his shoulder. "Why don't you three go get some food and then we'll call it a day. Your room is still here, so you three can just split it."

"Do we really have the time to waste, though?"

"For now, yes; and it's not time wasted. We could all use a full night's rest to recover."

"Alright," Akio nodded. That made sense. He was practically running on empty, anyways. "Do you want to join us for dinner, then?"

"Maybe another time," Aikuro sighed sadly. "As much as I might want to, I've got to settle in and make sure everything's ready to go."

"Mr. Mikisugi! The reports you requested are in!"

Aikuro sighed at his summoning, proving his point.

"Like I said, I've got to make sure all of our ducks are in a row first."

Aikuro patted Akio once more on the shoulder, then turned and walked towards the man who just called his name.

"Make sure to get a full nights rest, Akio," Aikuro called out to him over his shoulder. "The upcoming days will be tough. You'll need all the rest you can get. Hell, we all will."

Akio exhaled slowly through his nose, a frown forming on his face as he took his brother's words in.

Just what *did* the future have in store?

"Hey, Akio."

Akio blinked, his train of thought derailed.

"Yeah?" He asked, turning to face the duo.

"We heard something about food?"

"Please, Akio, we're hungry," Mako whined, rubbing her belly in circular motions. "So hungry..."

Akio snorted and shook his head. Now wasn't the time for his deep reflection.

"Yeah, of course," Akio said as he walked past the two, motioning for them to follow. "Come on, I'll show you the cafeteria."

Ryuko quickly fell into step with Akio, hesitation etched into her features.

"Uh, Akio?"

"Yes?"

"This cafeteria you mentioned..."

"What about it?"

"Do the people there cook in the nude, too? Because if so, I'll take my chances with eating sand."

Akio laughed and shook his head.

"No, it's not like a conventional cafeteria. You pick your food and you make it yourself. It's more like a giant, public kitchen than a cafeteria."

"Thank god," Ryuko sighed in relief. "I think I've seen enough crotches and asses to last me a life time."

Akio threw his head back and laughed once more. He considered making a snarky remark about what that meant for the nature of their relationship, but ultimately decided against it. It probably wouldn't be received that well.

"Foood..." Mako moaned, reminding the two of the task at hand.

"Don't worry, Mako," Akio chuckled. "It's just up ahead."

The two followed Akio into a much nicer building, this one actually made of bricks, concrete and actual foundations.

The inside looked pretty much like any school cafeteria would. The kitchen was in the front of the room, with a few refrigerators, sinks, ovens, microwaves and counters to prepare the food. In the back were several round tables, each with about five chairs.

"Good evening, Mr. Takahiro, sir!"

A single Nudist Beach man was waiting for them as they walked in, already in a salute.

"I thought you said there wasn't going to be any more naked people," Ryuko grumbled, crossing her arms.

"Good evening," Akio returned the greeting with a nod, ignoring Ryuko's remark. "What can I do for you?"

"We've already prepared your dinner," The man replied, pointing to a table that had two, large pizza boxes on it. "I hope pizza is acceptable."

Akio blinked, his eyes widening.

"How the hell did you get pizza delivered here?"

"We have our ways," The man winked and lowered his salute. "Enjoy."

The Nudist Beach operative left the cafeteria, leaving the three of them to their own devices.

"Well, that's convenient," Akio said to himself as he walked to the food. "I hope you two don't mind-"

"FOOD!"

Mako shoved Akio aside, running directly to the pizza and opening the top box, immediately grabbing a slice and stuffing it into her mouth in one bite.

It... it was like watching a lion devour its prey.

"Well, if she's doing it..."

Ryuko followed quickly after Mako, grabbing a slice of pizza for herself and taking a much more reserved bite than her friend.

"Oh, that's the good stuff," Ryuko moaned as she sat down in one of the vacant chairs, her attention now devoted to the food in her hand.

Akio let out an exaggerated sigh, but smiled at the two girls' reactions. Now that he saw the cheesy, delicious goodness that was the pizza, his stomach began growling angrily, begging him to indulge as well.

Grabbing a slice for himself, Akio sat down beside Ryuko and took a very large bite of his slice.

He savored the taste in his mouth, as it might very well be the last piece of pizza he'd have for a while.

"Oh, this is so goood!" Mako cried, stuffing another slice of pizza in her mouth.

"This is some pretty good pizza," Ryuko agreed as she grabbed herself another piece.

"Oh!" Mako squealed, shoving a third slice in her mouth. "You know what would be fun?"

"What?" Akio asked, only finishing his first piece.

"We should make our own pizza when we get home!" Mako exclaimed, devouring her fourth slice now.

"That would be fun," Ryuko grinned

"Yeah," Akio smirked. "Except we'd have to keep a close eye on Ryuko when we cooked, unless we wanted to burn the house down."

"Hey!" Ryuko exclaimed, punching Akio in the shoulder. "I'm not *that* bad."

"The last time we cooked, you didn't even know how to crack an egg," Akio pointed out.

"Well *excuse* me for not cooking that much," Ryuko huffed, crossing her arms and turning her head away.

"That's okay, Ryuko," Mako smiled and patted Ryuko on the knee. "You can be the hostess."

"Well, alright," Ryuko smiled. "That doesn't sound too-"

"We'll even get you a cute little maid outfit!"

"What?! No!"

"Let's not be too hasty now," Akio interrupted in a hurry. "Personally, I think that'd be an excellent idea."

"Well of course *you* would," Ryuko grumbled, a slight blush making its way to her cheeks.

"Come on! It'd be fun!" Mako persisted. "I'll even get one if you get one!"

"Yeah, Ryuko, take one for the team here," Akio insisted.

"No, no, no, no," Ryuko shook her head. "No. I refuse. We can make pizza, but dear god no maid outfits."

Mako shrugged, grabbing her fifth slice and shoving it into her mouth.

"... There goes my fantasy," Akio sighed, sadly nibbling on only his second slice of pizza.

Ryuko blinked, slowly turning her head to Akio

"What was that?"

Akio paled. Dear God, did he just say that out loud?

"Nothing," Akio replied calmly. "I didn't say anything. You must be hearing things."

Jesus Christ, I need to get some sleep. That's the second time tonight.

Ryuko narrowed her eyes at the man, but decided to let it slide. The pizza was too good to be ignored, anyways.

After dinner, the three made their way to Akio's old lodging to spend the night. He was slightly worried that it might be gone since he hadn't used it in years, but it was still standing, just as Aikuro had told him.

"Wow, it looks *great*," Ryuko deadpanned, her eyes lazily looking the shack up and down.

Just like the most of the buildings on the beach, the outside looked pretty shitty. It definitely looked like a shack, and in a lot worse condition than any of the ones in the slums of Honnou City looked. The outer walls were made with pretty flimsy looking steel that was already rusting, giving it the look that it hadn't been touched in years. The nameplate next to the door read 'Akio Takahiro,' but it had fallen apart some as some of the letters were missing.

"Just you wait," Akio smirked as he walked up to the door and pushed it open, revealing the inside.

The three walked inside, Ryuko and Mako's eyes widening.

"I'll be damned," Ryuko muttered as she glanced around at the room. "I take back what I said."

Akio nodded, grinning victoriously.

While the outside looked like trash, the inside was anything but.

The floors were made of a nice, soft carpet, that felt like you were walking on a cloud. In the corner of the room sat a king sized bed, already set up with some luxurious looking blankets and pillows. In the opposite corner sat a desk, still messy with random books and papers from the last time Akio had sat there.

The right wall was taken up with a giant bookshelf, stocked to the brim with hundreds of books. On the opposite wall a black, leather recliner was placed, with a blanket and a single pillow already sitting in the seat.

Walking over to his dresser beside the bed, Akio opened one of the drawers, pulling out three pairs of gym shorts and three t-shirts.

"Here," He said as he passed each girl a pair of shorts and a shirt. "These aren't your special pajamas, but they'll make do for now."

Ryuko and Mako accepted the clothing, Ryuko looking much more indifferent about the change in sleeping attire, while Mako was visibly distraught. She really did love her PJs.

"The bathroom's right over there," Akio continued, pointing at the door in the far corner of the shack. "You two can use it to get changed, take a shower, whatever you feel like doing."

The two voiced their thanks, then went into the bathroom to change.

Akio sighed as he took off his jacket, figuring he might as well do the same while he had the brief moment of privacy.

Carefully folding the article of clothing, he draped it over the desk chair, followed by his pants and undershirt. He wasn't completely sure how to properly care for a Goku uniform, or if he needed all three parts and not just the jacket, so he decided the best course of action was to just carefully fold them and place them together. If they were a little dirty still, so what? He wasn't exactly wearing it to look fashionable, anyways.

Grabbing his own pair of gym shorts, he quickly pulled them on, just in case Ryuko and Mako came out from changing quicker than he thought. He didn't exactly want to be only in his boxers if they happened to come back out.

Akio hesitated before putting on his shirt, his eyes drifting towards his left shoulder. It was still slightly red and swollen from the dislocation he had suffered at the hands of Ryuko a few weeks ago. That was to be expected, after all. The scar he had received from Iori was there as well, a grim reminder of his carelessness that night.

Akio sighed, gingerly rubbing the marred skin. There was only so many times he could injure his body before it would just give up on him. His left shoulder had already taken quite the licking.

Looking at the rest of his body, he noticed a few more fresh bruises along with a couple of new scratches. The armor of his Goku uniform had protected him well, but it wasn't impervious.

Akio sighed again and ran a hand through his hair. He really had to be more careful in the future. Ryuko's words tonight about him being too selfless had really struck home. He always believed that the risks he took could only affect himself, but damn was he dead wrong. How many times had she worried over him when he had gotten his ass kicked? What about Aikuro? Or Mako?

"Damn it, Akio," He cursed at himself.

His way of fighting had always been to leave out obvious openings, so that when his opponent attacked he could counter it, even at the cost of his own body. But that was dumb. Very, very dumb.

He'd have to pick a new strategy from here on out. He didn't want to be the cause of any more unnecessary stress.

"AIEEEE!"

"Mako, no! Wait a second!"

Akio flinched at the sudden shouts, turning on his heel to face the bathroom door that Mako had just burst out of.

"Mako?"

The two locked eyes, and Akio immediately realized what was awaiting him.

"Now Mako, before you- OOF!"

Mako barreled into him, wrapping him in a bear hug and tackling him to the ground.

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!" Mako laughed, her arms tightening around her friend in a death grip of a hug. "You know what I said to my Mom when you two first met? I said 'How cool would it be if those two ended up getting together?' and now look at you two! You're like peanut butter and jelly! White on rice! Cookies and milk!"

"I get the idea," Akio wheezed, weakly returning the hug.

He glared at Ryuko over Mako's shoulder, his eyes screaming 'See what you've done?'

Ryuko rubbed her forehead, purposefully avoiding Akio's eyes as she stared at the ground.

"Mako, at least let me put on a shirt," Akio croaked.

"No need!" Mako replied as she released Akio and hopped off of him. "I'll just sleep outside so you two can-"

"No!" Ryuko finally intervened, grabbing Mako by her arm and hoisting her up. "That's quite enough, Mako."

"Awh," Mako pouted, her excited expression deflating slightly. "If you say so..."

Akio grumbled to himself as he picked himself off the ground and dusted off his shorts.

"While I thank you for your enthusiasm regarding our relationship, Mako, I already have the sleeping arrangements figured out."

"Oh?" Mako asked hopefully.

"You and Ryuko can share the bed, and I'll sleep on the recliner. The bed's big enough for the both of you."

"Oh..." Mako sighed sadly, but nodded.

"Alrighty then... uh, I guess I'm going to take a shower," Ryuko mumbled as she turned back to the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind her.

"You two aren't very exciting," Mako whined as she walked over to the bed, throwing back the covers and climbing in.

"Sorry, Mako," Akio grinned as he put on a shirt. "If it's any consolation, I'm sure your idea on how we should sleep tonight would be quite interesting to hear."

Mako giggled, pulling the blankets up around her shoulders.

"Don't worry, Akio. There's always next time."

Akio stopped readying his own sleeping arrangements, his back going rigid.

"What was that, Mako?" Akio asked as he turned to face her.

Akio blinked dumbly at her, his jaw dropping slightly.

She was already asleep... She was already asleep!

"How?" Akio whispered to himself, stupefied by the sprightly girl. How could she be so lively at one instant, and then dead asleep the next?

It was an enigma.

Shaking the shock out of his head, Akio turned back to his recliner, putting his pillow on the headrest and then pulling the lever to make it lean back and extend the foot rest.

Plopping down on its cushioned surface, Akio let out a sigh of contentment. His body was so weak that he didn't even know if he could even pull the lever fully.

"Oh, goodness," Akio moaned, letting himself sink further into the seat. It was like he was lying down on a... well, a cloud. He couldn't tell if the recliner was this comfy, or if it was just his tired body begging for rest.

Closing his eyes, Akio was content to let Ryuko turn off the lights as she made her way to bed. He was ready to sleep.

...

Akio took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled, listening intently to the sound of the running shower in the next room, hoping that it would lull him to sleep.

...

He adjusted himself on the recliner, trying to get a teensy bit more comfortable so that he could drift off into the realms of sleep.

...

Nope.

His body was exhausted, but his mind was still running at full speed.

With everything quiet again except for the sound of the shower, Akio's mind drifted to what he was thinking about before Mako had tackled him, and from there he thought about the inevitable future once more. Just what did it have in store for him?

Akio frowned, his eyes clenched shut at this point.

What happened now? Whatever Satsuki Kiryuin had planned next, he presumed. They were basically playing on the defensive, waiting till Satsuki made her next move so that they could try and counter it. It wasn't like they could exactly take the fight to her, after all. The Kiryuin conglomerate was ridiculously huge. After their victory in Osaka today, they essentially owned Japan. There was no way that an organization as small as Nudist Beach, even with Ryuko's help, could go on the offensive against Satsuki and her mother.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts, that he didn't notice that the shower had turned off.

And what about his relationship with Ryuko? Did he make a mistake going for it now, of all the times? He didn't know what the next few days would hold, but he knew that they weren't going to be good. They weren't even close to bringing down the Kiryuins, or Dr. Matoi's killer, so how could he start a relationship right now? With Ryuko, no less. The task ahead of her was even more difficult than Akio's. Hell, Akio was just the support that held the ship together. He was the sidekick, while Ryuko was the superhero.

He didn't notice that the light had been turned off, nor did he notice the footsteps approaching him.

Ryuko returned his feelings, but what if their relationship somehow made things harder? What if it ended badly? They saw each other every day, after all. If it ended poorly that would really affect how the two operated.

'Don't dip your pen in the company ink,' is what his brother always told him. Akio had just rolled his eyes at it first, but maybe it held some merit?

Akio's trance was broken when he felt a great weight plop down in his lap, nearly causing him to let out a shriek.

His eyes snapped open, ready to ream out whoever had sat in his lap when the answer became obvious.

"Jesus, Ryuko," Akio breathed. "A little warning would have been nice."

"Sorry," Ryuko muttered, squirming around in Akio's lap as she tried to get comfortable without making it too awkward.

"It's fine," Akio replied, recovering from his initial shock. "Here."

He pulled the blanket out from between them, repositioning it so that it covered the both of them.

"Thanks..." Ryuko whispered, hesitantly resting her head on his chest.

The minute her head touched his chest, Ryuko shot back up, indecision written all over her face.

"Is, uh, is this too much too soon? I know we joked around a lot before, but..." Ryuko trailed off, staring down at her lap.

"I'm fine with it if you are," Akio smiled, looping his arms around her waist and pulling her closer.

Akio knew that this might be the only chance he had to actually act like he was in a relationship, and he wasn't going to squander it. Ryuko was probably thinking the same, hence the sudden closeness between the two.

"A-alright," Ryuko stammered, finally letting her head rest on his chest.

She wiggled a bit more in his grip as she got comfortable, eventually settling down and laying still against him.

Akio exhaled slowly, closing his eyes and resting his head on the back of the recliner, absentmindedly running a hand through Ryuko's hair. He didn't even realize he was doing it until he felt her wet hair between his fingers.

"This is nice," Ryuko sighed. "I don't think I've ever been pampered like this before."

"Me neither," Akio grinned. "Maybe we should make a habit of this."

"I'll take you up on that."

Akio let out a throaty chuckle, which Ryuko listened to happily as it left his throat.

It was quiet for a few minutes, the only audible sound in the room being the soft breathing of the two of them together.

"... Hey, Ryuko?" Akio began after a few more seconds of silence.

Ryuko turned her head up, her blue eyes meeting his green ones, even in the darkness of the room.

"Yes?"

Akio frowned for a fraction of a second before it was replaced with a loving smile.

"I'm glad you're here with me."

"J-jeez, Akio. Talk about sappy," Ryuko giggled as she snuggled a little closer to him, effectively hiding her blush. "But so am I."

Akio's arms tightened around her, pulling her closer in.

He wouldn't ask her what he was planning on asking her, because frankly, he already knew the answer.

Things *were* going to work out all right.

With that belief in his mind, it only took Akio a few seconds before he fell asleep, with Ryuko following close behind.

Author's Notes:

So there ya have it!

Yep. All of the good stuff. Fluff, romance, comedy, sex jokes. Just what the doctor ordered, am I right?

Not much to say about this chapter. Nothing that important happens, other than some Ryuko x Akio moments (which are the most important, right?!).

Anyhow, next chapter we'll get back to the storyline, and get to the episode where Ryuko receives a crash course on Life Fibers.

Thanks for reading everyone!

Until next time!

Hollow Ataraxia

Edit 8/26/15: Fanfiction is seeming to have some trouble recently with traffic stats and notifications. So, if you left a review, and I haven't messaged back, it's because it hasn't registered yet.

Author's notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next installment of Before My Body is Dry!

First, I'd like to apologize for the long wait with this update. Classes start Monday for me, and on Thursday I had to move back into my dorm. So my last week of summer has been filled with back to school shopping (why do they have to make these shitty books so damn expensive!), packing, and moving in. And good god, was it a mess. An expensive mess. I didn't really get started writing until Wednesday.

And on top of that, I bought a WiiU as a little treat for myself. So I'll be honest, I played a lot of that, trying to hone my Sm4sh skills. Lucina/Roy/Sheik FTW.

Anyhow, enough about that, and on with the chapter!

This chapter is basically a lot of talking, and not a lot of action. Hopefully it isn't too all over the place, but I wanted to fit in a lot of important stuff, and I did hint at a lot of things to come :). I feel like the flow of this chapter might be kinda meh, but that just might be me being my own worst critic.

Now then, on with the show!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

Akio's eyes slowly open, a giant yawn escaping his lips.

That was, without a doubt, some of the best sleep he had ever had. He didn't even stir once. Just straight, peaceful sleep. That's what being completely drained will do for you; well, that and having a nice sleeping buddy.

Akio smiled as he brushed a stray lock of black hair behind Ryuko's ear. She was still in a deep sleep, her mouth wide open as she breathed in and out slowly, a small dribble of drool escaping her mouth. Her eyelids occasionally fluttered, so she was probably in the middle of a dream. She must have been just worn out as he was.

"Ugh," Akio grimaced, feeling a small pool of spittle that had seeped through his shirt. He didn't take Ryuko for a drooler, so this was a surprise to him. At least next time he'd be prepared.

Akio leaned his head back on the recliner, letting his eyes drift to the ceiling. The only sound in the cabin was that of Mako's snoring and Ryuko's soft breathing. It was comforting, in a way, but he knew it couldn't stay like this.

He sighed and rubbed his eyelids. Today was just the beginning of what would only be a difficult string of days, maybe even weeks. Peaceful moments like this would come far and few between.

Akio laid a hand on Ryuko's head, absently playing with a few strands as he basked in the quiet morning. This little moment only made him yearn for more of it. There was something amazing about feeling the person you love in your arms, and that was something he had personally never felt before. He wished it could stay like this, but he knew that wasn't possible; at least, not for now.

He felt Ryuko begin to stir, her body twisting and turning as she got in her morning stretch.

"Morning," Ryuko mumbled, resting her head back on his chest and yawning.

"Morning," Akio replied back as he turned his head down to look at her. "Sleep well?"

"Hmmm," Ryuko hummed, not bothering to open her eyes. "So well that I could use another five minutes."

"Alright," Akio chuckled, letting himself relax on the recliner. He supposed he could stay like this for another five minutes. It was pretty comfy.

Ryuko repositioned herself on Akio's chest, causing her body to press into his gut.

Nope. Never mind.

"Hey, Ryuko?"

"Hmmm?"

"I have to go to the bathroom and you're pushing against my bladder."

Ryuko peeked one eye open, staring up at Akio.

"Oh. Now that you mention it, so do I."

"Really?" Akio smirked. "We could probably just share the bathroom, then. That's why there's a toilet tank and a toilet bowl, you know."

"That's fucking gross, man."

"It was a joke, Ryuko."

"Still gross."

Akio snickered and slowly slid himself out from underneath Ryuko, eventually making it off of the recliner and onto the carpet floor.

"You just can't appreciate my humor," Akio said as he arched his back, popping his spine.

"No, it's just that it's bad," Ryuko shot back as she stretched her arms out over her head.

"Better get used to it," Akio laughed as he walked to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. "Oh, and by the way-"

Akio cracked the door back open, poking his head out to look at Ryuko.

"-You drool. Like, a lot."

Akio laughed again as he closed the door just in time to block the thrown pillow from Ryuko.

He did his business quickly, then walked over to the sink to wash his hands and then his face. The cold water felt amazing against his skin, refreshing him and clearing away any leftover drowsiness in his head.

Finishing up, he walked back out of the bathroom and allowed the waiting Ryuko in, who stuck her tongue out at him as she passed by.

Akio grinned and walked over to his desk chair, grabbing the uniform draped over the back and unfolding it to carefully put it on.

It still felt so strange to him to wear it. He still couldn't get over how it felt on his skin, and it was only something you'd really only notice if you were actively looking for it. Compared to other clothing, his Three Star uniform was a lot warmer and a lot more itchy.

Life Fibers still blew his mind. Even though he knew a fair bit about them already, he was still looking forward to Aikuro's lecture later, even if it was going to be a little overkill, knowing him. Life Fibers were aliens? It was some shit straight out of a sci-fi novel.

"Maybe I'll write some sci-fi once all is said and done," Akio grumbled to himself as he slipped on his black jacket.

The minute the jacket fell onto his shoulders, he could feel his posture straighten a little and his shoulders square up. He didn't know if it was his mind or if it was actually the thirty percent Life Fibers, but he could feel the power that radiated from it touch his skin.

"I wonder if Ryuko goes through the same thoughts when wearing Senketsu?" He mused to himself as he tied his shoes.

As if on cue, the bathroom door opened, and Ryuko walked out wearing Senketsu himself.

"So, what's on the docket today?" She asked as she walked over to her sneakers and slipped them on.

"I know Aikuro promised you some answers, and then we have to talk about what we plan on doing next," Akio answered as he walked over to Mako in his bed. "So probably a lot of talking."

"Excellent," Ryuko deadpanned as she stood back to her full height.

Akio snorted, reaching down to Mako's shoulder to gently shake her awake.

"Mako. It's time to get up."

As expected, she didn't respond. She only snored louder as if to challenge Akio's attempts in waking her.

"Mako," He said a little more firmly, shaking her a little harder.

"Hmmm."

Mako rolled on to her back, her eyes still closed as she mumbled sleepily.

"No, Mr. Monopoly, I won't trade you Boardwalk..."

Akio rose an eyebrow and retracted his hand.

"... What?"

What kind of dream was that?

"Here," Ryuko said as she walked over to them. "Watch how a pro does it."

Reaching down, Ryuko flicked Mako in the nose pretty hard.

"MAKO!"

Mako's eyes snapped open and she sat straight up in bed, her head darting back and forth until she saw Ryuko standing above her.

"Oh, hey Ryuko," Mako greeted with her usual smile.

Ryuko gave Akio a smug grin that he rolled his eyes at.

"Morning, Mako. It's time to get up and get dressed."

"Affirmative!" Mako saluted and hopped out of bed, humming a merry tune as she grabbed her clothes and hustled into the bathroom.

"When she's having the Monopoly dream you have to get a little loud with her," Ryuko told him.

"Suuure," Akio pursed his lips and nodded. "I'll make sure to store away that little gem of information."

After Mako had gotten dressed, the three made their way out of Akio's shack and to one of the few buildings in the Nudist Beach hideout that wasn't a shitty shack or warehouse: the barracks.

The Nudist Beach barracks was a pretty run of the mill barracks. There were a few rooms for training, another mess hall, several rooms for teaching, and a some rooms filled with various equipment and outfits. Nothing spectacular, but it got the job done.

Akio lead the two into an empty classroom, where Tsumugu and Aikuro were already waiting for them.

Aikuro was standing at the front of the room by the smartboard, wearing a white lab coat with his back turned to them as he fiddled with a marker.

Tsumugu sat in one of the stray chairs, leaning against the back with his arms crossed. Akio noted with displeasure that he had changed into his Nudist Beach outfit.

Great. Another naked man.

"Ah, there you three are."

Aikuro turned towards them, giving a nod of greeting to each.

Of course he wasn't wearing anything underneath the coat.

"Go ahead and take a seat and we'll get started."

Akio sighed and plopped down next to Tsumugu, crossing his arms and leaning back in his seat. Ryuko and Mako followed suit, sitting down in the two other vacant seats.

"This ought to be exciting," Akio mumbled over to Tsumugu. Now, he didn't particularly like the man, but he felt he should at least try and be civil. He had saved his life a couple of times now, so it was the least he could do, even if he knew Tsumugu didn't like him that much either.

Tsumugu snorted. "Knowing Aikuro, I'm sure it'll be over dramatic."

Akio nodded. That was a definite.

Aikuro turned back to the board, slowly drawing a symbol.

"Answer me this, Ryuko," Aikuro said as he went to work. "How many creatures do you think there are on this Earth that wear clothing?"

Ryuko rose an eyebrow, glancing over at Akio out of the corner of her eye.

Akio shrugged at her. Aikuro was very obviously going somewhere with this.

"Duh, just humans," Ryuko answered after a moment of silence, resting her hands behind her head and leaning back in her seat.

"Correct."

Aikuro turned to face them, pulling out a metal pointer.

The image on the board changed to that of Earth, which Aikuro pointed to.

"Of all the countless species on Earth, only Homo sapiens wears clothing. Why is that?"

Aikuro didn't wait for anyone to answer and continued undisturbed with his lecture.

"'Only humans wear clothing'" isn't entirely correct. This 'clothing-wearing' creature became what is now humanity!"

The picture on the screen changed to that of a classic picture of evolution in progress; the ape slowly turning into the caveman, and then the regular man.

"Life Fibers caused Homo sapiens, which was just another anthropoid species, to evolve to its current state. Yes, in this case, the clothes made the mankind."

Akio exhaled slowly through his nose, taking his brother's words in. He had heard this spiel before, and even now it was somewhat hard to grasp. Clothing made humanity what it was today? So, evolution was simply caused by the ability of Homo sapiens to put on clothing?

It sounded like complete, utter bullshit, but even though, Akio knew it to be correct. Dr. Matoi and Aikuro's father had been the ones to work on it.

"T-that..." Ryuko stammered, her eyes wide. "That... is... the biggest load of shit I have ever heard!"

Ryuko stood up out of her chair, placing her hands on her hips.

"Clothing made humanity? What are you even talking about?"

The stage lights that Akio had somehow missed all turned on, bathing Aikuro in rays of purple light.

Aikuro threw his arms into the air, tilting his head back and laughing madly as the board behind him displayed pictures of several different galaxies and star systems.

"Oh, dear god," Akio sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Over dramatic' indeed.

"Life Fibers are a life form that came here from outer space! They arrived on ancient Earth and accelerated the evolution of humanity!"

"Then Senketsu is an alien?" Mako asked as she stood up as well.

Akio blinked. He could have sworn someone, somewhere just shouted ' *Hallelujah* '

"So, he's a sailor uniform, but he's an alien!" Mako exclaimed as she hopped around the room, motioning wildly with her hands and pretending to be an alien herself.

How did Mako connect the dots like that? It was impressive, coming from her. Even if her delivery was... interesting.

"Don't buy into it!" Ryuko hissed at Senketsu, then clenched her fist out in front of her as she glared at Aikuro. "What the hell is that crazy garbage?!"

"Would you mind listening quietly?" Aikuro frowned, his teacherly persona seeping through. "It's rude to interrupt."

"Rude to-?"

Ryuko stopped and looked around, noticing that she was now the only one standing, as everyone else in the room was sitting quietly and starting expectantly at Aikuro. Even Mako.

"I'll explain everything in due course," Aikuro reassured.

Ryuko sighed and sat back down in her chair.

"Now then," Aikuro began, clasping his hands behind his back. "Life Fibers are a life form that came here from outer space. They infest a world's life forms as parasites and breed by devouring using the electrical current of the creature's nervous system."

The board behind him began to flash various photos of lab experiments involving mice and Life Fibers. The slide show showed a white mouse getting cut open, injected with Life Fibers, and then closed up again.

"However, if they infest the host directly within its body, the nervous system is unable to withstand the strain and burns out."

The pictures turned into a video, showing the same mouse have a seizure as it slowly died.

"It is for this reason that they decided to cover their host's body."

The smartboard began to show another video, this time depicting a different white mouse, and this time with the Life Fibers attached to the outside of its body like a shell.

"Although the current received via the skin is small, the infested animal does not die with this method."

Aikuro paced back and forth as he continued his lecture, waving his arms around enthusiastically as he talked.

"They chose Homo sapiens, the terrestrial creature with the most developed cerebrum at the time, to be their hosts and accelerated their evolution. Humanity evolved. They developed humanity's brain far beyond that of any other terrestrial life form. Humanity's numbers multiplied, and they came to stand at the top of the ecosystem."

"But, it's only temporary," Akio spoke up for the first time.

"That's right," Aikuro nodded.

"To put it bluntly, we humans are the Life Fibers' food," Tsumugu added.

This revelation seemed to strike home for Senketsu, as his eye began to dart back and forth and his cloth began to shake rapidly.

"Calm down, Senketsu," Ryuko said as she placed her hand over her heart. "We haven't heard everything yet."

Akio's blank expression softened at the sight of the two. He couldn't even imagine what Senketsu would be going through right now. To hear that you were made of an alien life form that was biologically designed to eat humans... more specifically, his partner and best friend. It had to have been soul crushing.

"If that's true, why doesn't all clothing have Life Fibers in them? We humans wear clothes and go about our lives every day. It's only the

people at Honnouji Academy that are wearing messed-up clothes, right?"

As Ryuko talked, the purple floodlights covered Aikuro in light once more, and his white lab coat had fallen from his shoulders and to the floor.

"What you say is indeed true. The only conclusion is that the Life Fibers that accelerated human evolution went into a long period of dormancy, leaving behind only the tradition of wearing clothing. They only emerged from their silence about twenty years ago. Ragyo Kiryuin made a contact with the Original Life Fiber, and they awoke once again."

"That's what we were told by Dr. Matoi," Akio nodded.

"They were waiting for harvest time," Tsumugu growled. "They were waiting for their human livestock to grow!"

Akio frowned, sneaking a glance over at Senketsu. If sailor uniforms could sweat, he definitely was.

"Look, just calm down!" Ryuko shouted at him. "You're not like that, Senketsu!"

As she spoke, Aikuro had walked up behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder and leaning in to whisper into her ear.

"Has Senketsu's world been turned upside-down?" He asked the dumbstruck Ryuko. "Then tell him for me. You and Senketsu are our only hope."

"Hope?"

"Yes," Aikuro replied and took a step back. "Kamui Senketsu was artificially created by Dr. Matoi to fight Life Fibers. And the only one who can wear that Kamui to its full potential is you, Ryuko."

Ryuko gasped softly, her eyes widening in shock.

"Only... me? But why?"

"You have an unusually high Life Fiber tolerance, at least triple that of Akio and he was our fallback plan. Your father was aware of your superior tolerance, so he made Senketsu for you."

Ryuko's eyes only widened more, a few beads of sweat rolling down her face. She was still having trouble taking it all in.

The truth can do that to you.

"To thwart the Kiryuins' ambitions," Aikuro muttered to himself before speaking up. "The Doctor had originally studied Life Fibers under Ragyo Kiryuin's orders. But when he learned the threat they posed, he escaped from under her thumb and secretly founded a rebel organization."

"... Nudist Beach," Akio whispered.

With that revelation out and in the open, the room went quiet. Everyone looked expectantly at Ryuko, who was looking down at her chest and at Senketsu's eye. Judging from his closed eyelid and the look of concentration on Ryuko's face, Akio assumed Senketsu was talking about something important.

Akio sighed. If only he could hear him too.

"I apologize for keeping you in the dark all this time," Aikuro said as he put back on his lab coat. "But the Kiryuins are powerful. Until you were able to summon up all of Senketsu's power at will, I couldn't tell you the whole story."

"And if I got overwhelmed by the power of the Life Fibers," Ryuko paused and turned to look at Tsumugu. "You'd put me down on the spot without mercy."

Akio's eye twitched, his teeth grinding silently in his mouth as he remembered exactly how infuriating Tsumugu could be to him.

"Yeah, that's right," Tsumugu replied flippantly. "And I still intend to do just that."

Tsumugu glanced at Akio out of the corner of his eye, silently challenging him on the matter.

Akio's clenched his fists, but didn't say anything.

Ryuko closed her eyes and exhaled slowly.

"You're right, I wouldn't have been able to believe any of this stuff otherwise."

Aikuro nodded. "This is the truth."

"Now that that's out of the way, we need to get to the heart of the matter," Akio interrupted, if only to change the topic of conversation.

"Yes," Aikuro nodded once more. "The clothing made by REVOCS, the company headed by Ragyo Kiryuin, is worn in almost every country around the world. Life Fibers are woven into all of them. They are still dormant right now, but when that clothing awakens, I can't begin to imagine what will happen. But one thing is for certain: it will be a profound threat to the human race."

Akio's expression darkened. He knew that already, but just hearing it made him feel on edge.

Ryuko huffed and sat back down in her chair, resting her arms on the back of it as she sat backwards in it. Resting her chin on her arms, she stared off into space, her face slowly twisting into a scowl as she thought.

The long, drawn out conversation had proven too much for Mako, as she was slumped over in her seat, snoring softly. Occasionally she'd wake up and sit straight, but within seconds she'd be out again.

"Oh, now I get it!" Ryuko exclaimed, tilting her chair back and forth as she spoke.

Akio looked over to her, raising an eyebrow.

"You want me and Senketsu to work hand in hand, and fight for the sake of the peace of all mankind, is that it?"

Ryuko shot out of her chair and kicked it aside.

"To hell with that! That's crap!"

"Ryuko!" Aikuro exclaimed.

"So Senketsu is just a weapon, huh? A combat uniform created to fight? Screw that! He's got a will of his own!" Ryuko shouted, patting the cloth where Senketsu's eye was.

Akio frowned and turned away. While he didn't like thinking about it that way, the fact of the matter is that Senketsu *was* created to be a weapon. These two *were* chosen to fight for the sake of mankind, whether they liked it or not. It was the cards they were dealt, and as unfair as it was, there was no changing it.

"Created to kill others of his own kind?" Ryuko tilted her head downwards, letting her bangs cover her eyes. "That's seriously screwed up! Don't you think?!"

"Of course it is."

All eyes turned to Akio as if they had just remembered he had been there all along.

"I don't like it anymore than you do, but happy thoughts and good intentions won't change anything," Akio continued calmly, a hint of regret in his voice. "Sitting around and wishing for a better life accomplishes nothing. Only action can change things."

Ryuko took a few deep breaths, either to calm herself or to think, but neither worked. Her scowl only deepened.

Finally coming to a decision, Ryuko reached for the bottom of her top and tugged it upwards. After a few seconds of struggling with the clothing, Ryuko pulled off Senketsu and threw him into the chair beside her.

The room collectively gasped; everyone except Tsumugu, that is.

Ryuko stood tall and proud, unwavering even though she was now only wearing her undergarments.

"Your name's Nudist Beach, right? What's wrong with me getting naked?"

Everyone in the room remained silent, all eyes trained on Ryuko.

"I can't put you on to fight, Senketsu, and there's no reason for you to fight, either."

Akio heard Tsumugu huff beside him, and noticed his hand reaching for the gun strapped to his waist as he stood.

"Let me tell you two useful pieces of information," Tsumugu began as he grabbed his gun and cocked it, leveling it directly at Ryuko and Senketsu. "One: A Kamui that doesn't fight has no value. Two: In which case, I will terminate it right here and now!"

Ryuko took a step forwards, her eyes trained on the gun pointed at her, daring him to shoot.

"You'll have to-"

Akio rose from his seat, pushing Ryuko back with one hand and grabbing a hold of Tsumugu's with the other and forcing it downwards.

"That's more than enough," Akio barked at Tsumugu. "With everything that's happened, do you really think your grudge against Ryuko and Senketsu is that important?"

Tsumugu frowned slightly, and was preparing to push Akio aside when he spoke once more.

"You probably wouldn't even be here right now if it weren't for those two. How do you think the fight in Osaka would have really played out if Ryuko and Senketsu hadn't forced Satsuki to a draw? Did you ever stop to think about that? I can paint a picture for you, if you'd like. It won't take me that long."

Tsumugu's frown deepened, but Akio could tell that his words had gotten through to him.

Ryuko crossed her arms, tapping one foot impatiently while she glared at Akio.

"I think I very specifically said I don't need you to fight my battles for-"

"And *you*," Akio continued, turning around to stare down Ryuko. "While your 'going naked' was a noble sentiment on Senketsu's behalf, did you even stop to ask him if that's what he wanted you to do?"

Ryuko stopped in her tracks and turned her head to Senketsu, who was already being held up by Mako, ready and waiting.

"Senketsu?"

Senketsu seemed to respond to both of their statements, as his top began to move as if he were talking.

Ryuko walked over to the two, and the three of them immediately started talking about colds or something. It was hard for Akio to tell given the fact he only heard about half of the conversation, but he assumed that Senketsu told her she'd catch a cold if she didn't put him back on.

After talking for a few moments, the three began to horse around, the deadly confrontation that occurred only seconds ago already forgotten.

"You make a valid point, Takahiro," Tsumugu admitted as he lowered his gun. "I won't be shooting anyone today."

Akio closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. As much as he loved the people in this room, minus Tsumugu, they could get off topic very, very easily. It irritated him sometimes, but he tried not to let it show too much. There's nothing wrong with taking things lightly, but every once and a while things needed to be taken seriously.

Hell, Ryuko and Tsumugu were ready to tear each other's throats out, and yet the two were on the same damn side! There were more important battles to worry about.

Akio took another deep breath, feeling anger bubble in his chest slightly. They were so ready to fight each other that they didn't even think of the repercussions of such a foolish action.

"Why don't we take some time to clear our heads?" Akio asked as he turned to his brother.

"That's probably a good idea," Aikuro nodded.

"Alright, good," Akio replied as he walked out. Ryuko and Mako didn't notice him leave, as they were still chatting with Senketsu.

It was probably for the best he got a moment of alone time; at least for now. He had a call to make, and he'd rather he did it in private.

Akio stepped out into the hallway, briskly walking down the hall as he pulled out his cell phone and punched in the number of his mother.

He was slightly worried that the connection would still be down, but after a few rings someone picked up.

" *Hello?* " Kasumi answered.

"Hey, Kasumi," Akio greeted. "It's me, Akio. I just thought I'd check up on you guys."

" Oh, Akio! It's good to hear from you. I was wondering if you were ever going to call us ."

"Yeah, well," Akio mumbled. "Anyway, how are things over there? Did you find the Mankanshokus alright?"

" We did. We told them that you and Mako sent us and they were very welcoming. They really are a nice family. A little eccentric at times, but a lovely family nonetheless."

"That's good," Akio sighed, a grin slowly growing on his face. He had the worst feeling that something bad was going to happen to them on the way there, but it seemed to be for naught. "How're you settling in?"

" Great! Hiroshi and Bazarro have gotten along splendidly, and Mataro is very considerate of Akiko. And Sukuyo is just the sweetest thing! Such a good cook, too. Like I said, the Mankanshokus have been very accommodating. "

Well, that was somewhat surprising to hear. He was expecting them to get along, but not this much. Not that it was bad, just surprising.

" In fact, they even told us some stories about you! " Kasumi continued.

"They did?"

" Don't worry, they were all good things, " Kasumi giggled before going silent for a few moments. *" They say you've gotten especially close with a girl named Ryuko? "*

Akio sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Even though she was trying her best to hide it, he could still hear his mother snicker over the line.

"A story for another time," Akio answered. "So everything's alright, right?"

" *Awh, if you say so,* " Kasumi replied with mock sadness. " *Yeah, everything is going great. Will you be joining us soon?* "

"I don't know. Things are still up in the air at the moment, but I'll try."

"*Alright, just be safe, okay?*"

Akio blinked a few times, feeling a lump rise in his throat.

"Y-yeah, yeah I will," He croaked after a few seconds of silence. "I promise."

" *Good. And remember that you promised. Akiko is really wanting to see you, you know.* "

"Right," Akio smiled. "I'll remember. And If you need anything, or anything happens, anything at all, just call this number, okay?"

" *I will... Akio?*"

"Yes?"

" *Do... do you mind if I say something?*"

Akio rose an eyebrow at the hesitation in her voice.

"What is it?"

"... *You're sure you don't mind? It's kind of long. If you'd rather, I can let you go and we can finish talking later. I imagine you're pretty busy.*"

"Of course I wouldn't mind," Akio replied quickly, now more than a little curious as to what she had to say.

" Well... I just wanted to say that we love you, honey, " Kasumi said after a brief pause. " You didn't have to help us like this after everything that's happened, but you did. I know it might not be my place to say this given our past, but you've grown up to be a wonderful man. We're all so proud of you."

" ... "

Akio faltered and blinked away a few stray tears, the lump in his throat only building.

He wiped an arm across his eyes before continuing.

"T-thank you, Mom. Tell Dad and Sis that I'll see them soon."

" I will. See you soon, son."

Akio slowly brought his hand down, closing his phone and putting it back in his pocket.

Running a hand over his face and through his hair, Akio tried to recollect himself as he began walking away.

When he did, the only thing that remained was a giant, child-like smile.

An hour later, and after plenty of time alone to think, Akio found himself outside of the Nudist Beach compound and back out in the ruined city of Osaka.

He told himself he wanted to get some fresh air to clear his head, but in reality he just wanted to survey the damage once more. He was unconscious for at least a third of the fight of Osaka, so he was sure he missed a lot of what happened.

"Damn..." Akio muttered, his eyes widening at the sight of the downed, steel-beamed, tower of Osaka.

That only proved his point. It just goes to show that if you fall asleep around these people, you sure could miss a lot.

Climbing over a few piles of rubble, Akio climbed atop a giant boulder of concrete, sitting down at the top of it. He kept his eyes trained on the destroyed tower, feeling goose bumps begin to spread across his body at the sight of it.

It was frighteningly beautiful, in a way. There could only be a few instances in this world that could cause damage like this; natural disasters and human-made ones, mostly. And here he was, one of the few people in the world that could witness something like this and live to tell the tale.

Akio shivered, feeling immensely guilty for finding beauty in the destruction. These ruined buildings were people's homes, their livelihoods. It was wrong of him to think in such a manner. He had no idea what these people were going through.

"I wonder where they went..." Akio mumbled to himself as he hugged his knees to his chest, resting his chin on his knee.

How many people got out in time? How many were stuck here as the battle raged? How many homes destroyed? Schools? Hospitals?

Were there any injuries?

... Were there any casualties?

Akio sighed and shook his head. He couldn't get caught up in the statistics. If he did, it'd only weigh him down. He'd never be able to stop thinking about it if he knew the truth.

Ignorance is bliss, after all.

Content to put it out of his mind, Akio turned his head to the sky, his eyes moving back and forth as he examined the starry night. The

clouds and smoke were gone now, and the night sky could finally be seen.

As he stared up at the stars above, his mind drifted to Ryuko, and how she was taking everything. It was funny how easily that it seemed to happen now.

It was incredible to think about how much had happened in the span of a few days. Two days ago, Ryuko was livid with him, furious about his choice in helping Satsuki and taking her up on the offer of the Goku uniform. Yesterday, the two fought for their lives, the day ending with them declaring their love for each other. And today, he woke up with her in his arms.

It almost felt like a dream.

Akio smiled slightly at the sight of the full moon. The night sky was so far away, and yet, it felt closer, as if Akio could reach out and touch it.

It really was a beautiful night.

He had looked up at these same stars before, and in the same frame of mind. It was the first night he had stayed over at the Mankanshokus, the night Ryuko found him on the rooftop and the two stared at the stars together. Back then, and even now, he thought the stars symbolized wishes and dreams. They were always there, just waiting for you to reach out and take them. No matter what tragedy could befall you, they would always be in the night sky, shining brightly to dispel the darkness.

Once upon a time, back before he had even met Ryuko, he felt that they were just stars that he could not reach and wishes that could not be granted.

Akio raised a hand, closing a fist around one particularly bright star.

"There you are."

Akio flinched, retracting his hand and turning his head towards the sudden sound.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, you know," Ryuko grumbled, placing her hands on her hips as she glared playfully at him. "Luckily Tsumugu said he saw you walking out here, otherwise I'd never find you."

"Sorry about that," Akio smiled apologetically. "I just needed some fresh air."

"Now that you mention it, so could I," She agreed as she walked towards him.

Ryuko grunted as she scaled the rock, making it to the top and sitting down next to Akio. The two sat in silence for a few moments, just enjoying each other's company. It actually reminded Akio of the night he was just thinking about. An interesting coincidence.

"Pretty bad, huh?"

Akio glanced over at her, raising an eyebrow.

"Osaka," Ryuko nodded towards the destroyed tower. "Senketsu said it's the result of the power of Life Fibers. Can't say I disagree."

Akio nodded slightly, his eyes drifting to the ruined city once more. He took part in this destruction, too. He was as guilty as anyone else.

"Hey, Akio. Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

Ryuko turned to him, her expression surprisingly serious.

"Do you ever get scared?"

Akio blinked, slightly taken back by the question.

"Where's this coming from?"

"Just answer the question," Ryuko sighed.

"Alright," He paused for a brief moment to think it over. "All of the time."

"Really?"

"Of course," Akio replied, closing his eyes in thought. "All of this scares me. If we fail, there's no telling what could happen to humanity as we know it."

Akio hugged his knees a little tighter to his chest,

"And even if we succeed, there's no telling if it'll come without sacrifices."

That was one of his greatest fears. To him, it wouldn't be much of a victory if his loved ones didn't make it out with him.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one."

Akio's muscles relaxed, opening his eyes to look over at Ryuko.

"Huh?"

"It's nice to know I'm not the only one who's afraid of the future," Ryuko smiled at him, her hand reaching out to take a hold of his.

Akio returned the smile, his hand tightening around hers.

Feeling particularly affectionate after that, Akio scooted over, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and resting his head on hers.

Ryuko accepted the embrace, letting herself relax in his grip. To be honest, Akio was somewhat worried that she might be upset with him for earlier, so this was relieving. He had been pretty blunt earlier.

"Can I ask you another thing?"

"Jeez, I guess so."

Ryuko rolled her eyes at the smarmy tone, but proceeded undisturbed.

"Was what Mikisugi said really true?"

"Which part?"

"The part about you being Senketsu's fallback," Ryuko clarified.

"Oh," Akio responded, surprised at the question. He didn't think that she had caught that. "Yeah, yeah I was."

"Seriously?" Ryuko asked, looking up at him.

"Hmhm."

"Small world," Ryuko mumbled to herself, turning her head back to the stars.

"Yeah, I guess so. If by some freak chance he *had* come down to me, it wouldn't have worked out, though."

"Huh?" Ryuko looked back to him. "Why's that? Senketsu certainly likes you well enough, and if he had to go to anyone else, you'd be my next and only choice."

Akio bit back a snicker. She was certainly protective of Senketsu. It was cute, really, and he was sure the feeling was mutual between the two.

"For obvious reasons," Akio replied. "Aikuro was quite right when he said only you could actually wear him. You two have a connection that no one else could have, or even understand. You guys are quite literally like yin and yang. If the situation had called for it, I *might*

have been able to wear him, but it would have been for probably five minutes tops, and no way would we be synchronized."

"So what you're saying is..." Ryuko began, a smirk slowly growing on her lips. "Is that I'm basically better than you at everything?"

"Yeah, I guess," Akio grumbled, turning his head away. "Smart ass..."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"... Aaaanyways," Ryuko deflected and patted Senketsu's eye. "Senketsu says he appreciates you as a friend, but he's certainly glad you're not his partner. He says your blood would be too salty."

Akio rose an eyebrow at that. "Too salty? Why's that?"

"Sorry," Ryuko shrugged with a grin. "That's between me and Senketsu."

Akio rolled his eyes, but a quiet chuckle still escaped his lips.

"Wait..." Ryuko stopped herself, her eyes narrowing as a thought struck her. "That reminds me, why is it that only I can hear him anyways?"

"Senketsu's Life Fibers have been spliced with your central nervous system's DNA," Akio answered bluntly.

"What?!"

"That's why he can only be heard and worn by you," Akio continued, eyeing Ryuko worriedly. "I know it's been a lot to take in today. I'm sorry about that."

"Yeah," Ryuko blinked a few times, her eyes lost in thought. "Jesus..."

"I'm sorry to interrupt-"

Both of them flinched, their heads swiveling to look behind them, where Aikuro and Tsumugu were both watching them.

"-But you two need to come with us," Aikuro finished, Tsumugu nodding with his statement.

"Why, what's up?" Ryuko asked as she rose to her feet, her previous quandry already forgotten.

"Our camera feeds show that the Kiryuins are mobilizing," Aikuro answered, his face twisting into a scowl. "Even Ragyo."

"What?!" Akio gasped, shooting to his feet. "Where?!"

"Come," Aikuro said, turning on his heel to walk back to the base. "We need to keep a close watch on our surveillance."

"Aikuro," Akio repeated, his heart falling into the pit of his stomach. "I asked you a question."

"It's best that I show you," Aikuro replied, not bothering to turn and face him. "Follow me."

And there you have it!

Like I said, a lot of talking, and not particularly a whole bunch of structure. I hope it wasn't too all over the place.

Anyhow, not much to say about this chapter. Lots of talking, lots of meaningful moments, and lots of inward reflection. I guess every fic needs one of these chapters every once and awhile.

With this chapter out of the way, things are going to happen hard and fast. Next chapter we'll get to ceremony at Honnouji,

and then after that a whole bunch of other things that I can't tell you guys about.

But believe me when I say things are going to get intense now. There won't be very many more chapters like this.

Thanks for reading guys! I should have the next chapter out a little quicker than this one unless the first week of classes decides to bend me over.

Until next time!

There Will Be Blood

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Before we get started, fanfiction is still having trouble showing traffic stats and reviews(I think?) so if you left a review and it didn't register or I haven't replied, that's why. It's been like 5 days now, so I hope they fix it soon. If by chance you DID leave a review and it didn't pop up, you can just PM me if you want if it's something you really wanted to say. I wouldn't have you write two reviews for the same chapter lol. I'm HOPING that they fix the problem soon. I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't a tidbit annoyed by it all.

We got a biggun on our hands here. Lots and lots of stuff going on. Honestly, I was going to cut it in half, but I decided to keep it as is. I didn't want to split this episode of the anime into two different chapters. I'd rather get it done in one go, especially with what I have planned for the next chapter.

Boy, I am super stoked to get to this part of my story. It's going to be fun! Definitely going to throw some curve balls at you in the next couple chapters.

So read, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Akio burst into the surveillance room, immediately walking over to the monitors that showed the live feed from Honnou City and Honnouji Academy.

His eyes scanned each monitor as his heart thumped in his chest. He had an idea of what was happening, but he wasn't entirely sure.

"Please be wrong, please be wrong," Akio mumbled to himself, his eyes finally landing on the monitor that showed Satsuki Kiryuin making a declaration to her students.

Akio paled. A declaration about the Cultural and Sports Grand Festival, held in honor of Ragyo Kiryuin.

A few seconds later, the other three walked in after him.

"What the hell is this?" Ryuko asked as she stopped beside Akio.

"A video feed from hidden cameras I had set up inside Honnouji Academy," Aikuro answered, walking over to the monitors to examine them himself.

"If Ragyo Kiryuin is coming, too, this must be something big."

"How do you know that she is?" Akio asked of Tsumugu. "It's just held in her honor, it doesn't mean she's coming as well."

"A reliable source says that she's heading to the Academy by helicopter as we speak," Aikuro replied, pressing a button on the keyboard to bring up images of Ragyo on one of the monitors.

"Who is this Ragyo Kiryuin?" Ryuko asked, leaning forward to look at her picture.

"She's the leading figure of the Kiryuin Conglomerate and Satsuki's mother," Akio muttered, running a hand over his face. "Using her position as the REVOCS CEO she's pushing to sell clothing laced with Life Fibers all around the world."

"Good god she's blinding. She's even gaudier than Satsuki!" Ryuko scoffed. "Like daughter skank, like mother skank."

Akio tuned the rest of the conversation out, his eyes searching the monitors for more evidence of what he feared.

"Oh, no," Akio breathed, his eyes widening.

"Hm?" Tsumugu rose an eyebrow, turning to look at the same monitor Akio was looking at. "They're bringing in Life Fibers in bulk? What could they be up to?"

"She plans to conduct the final experiment at Honnouji Academy!" Aikuro exclaimed, his eyes widening at the sight as well.

"Huh?"

"Honnouji Academy is an experimentation city," Aikuro explained to Ryuko, running a hand through his hair while he talked. "Goku uniforms, created to study human resistance to Life Fibers. Repurposing them for military use and conquering all of the country's academies. Then forcibly distributing Life Fiber-laced uniforms to teenagers, those who have the highest resistance."

"... Damn it."

Akio collapsed into a nearby chair, resting his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands.

"Then she offers up ever last person gathered at the Academy as human sacrifices to the Life Fibers," He choked out, his nails digging into his skin.

"Human sacrifices?!"

"Yes," Aikuro continued for him. "It must be her final experiment to fully awaken the Life Fibers. Gather a mass of people wearing Life Fiber-laced clothing in one spot and then instantly convert them into Life Fibers. That is the real purpose of the Cultural and Sports Grand Festival."

"Wait," Ryuko paused, looking back and forth between Akio and Aikuro. "So you're saying that Mako's family is gonna be eaten by their clothes?!"

"Put in simple terms," Aikuro frowned, his eyes moving to Akio. "I suppose they will."

"Damn it!" Akio shouted and punched his knee. "I thought I had more time to get them out of there! I thought I had more time..."

"More time?" Aikuro rose an eyebrow, realization dawning on his face when he realized what he meant by the phrase. "... You sent them there, didn't you."

Aikuro sighed and shook his head, but didn't say anything on the matter. It would be pointless to scold Akio on it at this point.

"Sent who where?" Ryuko asked, glancing over at Aikuro.

Aikuro only gave her a meaningful look, and soon, realization hit her too.

Akio clenched his eyes shut, gritting his teeth in anger and self-loathing. He was the one that sent his family into that deathtrap! Why, why did he do that? He knew full well about the experiment since the start, why did he think that he had the time to get them out of there? He shouldn't have listened to Mako in the first place! He should have just been harsher with them, and just forced them to go somewhere else! Hell, even a goddamned ditch would have been a better choice. It was because he was soft that this happened! Deep down, a part of him wanted his family to meet Mako's parents, even if he would never admit it to anyone, not even himself. That was an idiotic wish. He should have just got them out of there and been done with it.

It wasn't only Akio's family in danger now, either. Mako's family was in as much danger as his was.

If any of them they died, it was on his hands.

"What have I done?" Akio cursed himself. "I sent them to their deaths..."

"Screw that! No way are we gonna let that happen!"

Ryuko outstretched a hand to Akio, her palm facing up, ready and waiting.

"We'll bring down both Ragyo Kiryuin and Satsuki Kiryuin, while saving everyone in the process! Isn't that right, Akio?"

Akio looked at the hand, then up to Ryuko, her deep blue eyes meeting his murky green ones. She looked the same as she always did, stubborn determination written all over her face. Ryuko didn't look fazed in the slightest by the news.

It was like she knew it wouldn't be any trouble.

"Right?"

Akio reached up and grabbed on to her hand to pull himself up.

"Right."

"Leaping straight into the jaws of danger?" Aikuro smirked.

"That's right," Ryuko replied with fierce determination, slapping Akio hard on the back. "We're gonna jump down its throat and rip its guts out with our teeth!"

Well, that was one way of phrasing it.

"I won't lose control again," Ryuko continued, raising her head and looking down at it. "No one will shed any more bitter tears because of me. And one way or another, I have to settle this fight with Satsuki."

Ryuko turned her eyes to Senketsu.

"Are you with me Senketsu?"

Akio could only assume that Senketsu replied with an 'of course.'

Ryuko looked up and met Akio's eyes once more, giving him a nod that he returned. As long as he was with her, they could succeed.

But...

"This should be interesting," Tsumugu grinned and cocked one of his guns. It sounded like he was on board.

"Oh brother, I guess you leave me no choice," Aikuro said, throwing his hat in the ring as well. "Let's hurry, then. We don't have much time."

Akio's face flickered into a frown for a fraction of a second, going unnoticed by the others in the room. This would be undoubtedly their toughest fight yet. Not only would they be taking on Ragyo and Satsuki, which would be a feat all in itself, but they'd also be fighting the rest of the Academy and whatever hell the Kiryuins had in store for them.

There was only one way Akio would be able to live with himself after the outcome of today. Well, two, but he doubted that the second, more preferred choice would fall into his lap like that.

"Right," Akio affirmed and turned to Ryuko. "Ryuko, go tell Mako the news and meet us at the garage. If you can't find it, have someone show you."

Ryuko nodded and sprinted out of the room, leaving the three men alone.

"Tsumugu," Akio continued, turning to the mohawked man. "If you don't mind, could you get one of our men to gather our rides? We'll need a way to get there, after all."

Tsumugu shrugged and walked out of the room, setting out to do what he was asked. And surprisingly with no backtalk.

"Aikuro," Akio frowned, turning to his brother. "We should discuss our plan of action."

Akio and Aikuro walked into the Nudist Beach garage, where Ryuko, Tsumugu, and even Mako was waiting for them.

Tsumugu did as he was told, as there were four rides already waiting on them. Aikuro's black muscle car with the DTR trailer attached to the rear, Tsumugu's green motorcycle and Ryuko's red motorcycle side by side, and to Akio's surprise, he had even got him his old personal vehicle. Just like Tsumugu and Aikuro, Akio had his own ride of choice. Being third in command had its perks.

"Are you sure about this, Akio?" Aikuro repeated the same question that he had been for the entire walk there. "We could just think up something else-"

"No, Aikuro," Akio replied with the same answer. "If worse comes to worse, it's the only way."

"But that's idiotic!" Aikuro hissed, stepping in front of his brother to cut him off. "Why are you putting yourself on the cross like this?! I know you're upset with what has happened, but it doesn't have to be this way!"

"No," Akio glared at him. "You and I both know that won't work. If things go out of control, you need to make sure you and everyone else gets out of there."

Akio's face softened, his lips tugging upwards into a mirthless smile.

"And besides, that's just in case we don't stop them. With Ryuko on our side, I don't think we have anything to worry about."

Aikuro frowned. "... Yeah."

"Hey, is everything alright over there?"

Akio and Aikuro both turned to look at Ryuko.

"Of course," Akio replied quickly and walked towards her. "Just discussing the finer details of what comes next."

Ryuko nodded, but her eyes lingered on Akio and then traveled to Aikuro, who purposefully avoided her eyes.

Looking back to Akio, her eyes narrowed at the suspicious looking backpack on his back.

"Ah, man," Akio whistled as he walked up to his car. "It's been a while since I've driven you."

Akio ran his hand across the sleek, black paint of his Camaro. It was one of the newer models, giving it that 'sports car' look to it that a lot of the more modern cars had to them. A white stripe ran down the middle of it, beautifully contrasting with the glossy black paint that surrounded it.

It had been a *while* since the last time he had driven this car, at least two years. He didn't know how Aikuro had gotten it for him, since he knew it had to have been expensive, but somehow he did, and Akio had loved it ever since. One of his biggest regrets was that he couldn't bring this baby to Honnou City with him. Being third in command *definitely* had its perks.

After Aikuro had given Tsumugu the Tailor's Dagger and Tailor's Glove, he turned around to address the others.

"Our targets are only Ragyo and Satsuki," Aikuro told the three. "Ignore everything else."

"Well, it's not like there's anything else we can do with just the four of us," Ryuko pointed out. "Just make sure to keep Mako safe."

"Sure. I've asked our remaining members to look after her here."

Akio nodded with their statements, opening his car door and stopping when Mako decided to speak up.

"Don't ditch me here, Ryuko!" Mako cried.

"Mako..." Ryuko sighed.

"C'mon, let's go home!" Mako persisted, her cheeks puffing out.

"Dummy, Honnouji Academy isn't safe for you!"

"She's right, Mako," Akio agreed. "This time, it's best if you don't come along."

"But it's my home, too!"

Ryuko sighed again and climbed on her motorcycle, but the minute her rear touched the seat, Mako hopped on behind her and wrapped her arms around her stomach. She sure wasn't going to let up anytime soon.

"Damn it, Mako!"

"If you two are going, then so am I!"

Mako's face was set in determination. She wasn't moving from her spot.

"Mako..." Akio frowned.

"Oh, fine," Ryuko smirked. "I forgot you don't listen once you've made up your mind, either."

Akio exhaled slowly and shook his head. This was a terrible idea.

Walking over to his passenger side door, he shrugged off his backpack, and very, very carefully placed it down on the open seat. Giving it a once over to make sure it wouldn't be going anywhere,

Akio walked around to the other side of the car, opening the door and hopping in.

Buckling his seatbelt, he let one hand rest on the steering wheel, while the other rested on the key in the ignition.

This was it. It had gotten here faster than he had anticipated, but that didn't matter now. In the morning they'd be facing not only Satsuki, but Ragyo as well.

It was all happening so quick...

He closed his eyes and thought back to the events of the night before. The confession with Ryuko, the winding down at the Nudist Beach base, the pizza dinner.

... Her sleeping in his lap.

"Keep a clear head, Akio," He breathed, turning the key in the ignition. "It's just one last battle."

Just one last battle . The words echoed over and over again in his head.

After this, every day could be like yesterday, without any fear of what the future might hold. He could spend his days with Ryuko, go fishing with Aikuro, make pizza with Mako. That possible future was what he was going to fight for.

Shifting the gear into drive, Akio slammed his foot on the gas. The car's wheels skidded on the pavement before the black car shot forwards with the other three close on his heels.

Akio's hands white-knuckled the steering wheel, his eyes darkening.

It was just one last battle.

The trip from Osaka to Honnou City was a long one, but thanks to the completely empty highways and their incredible speed, they were able to get there in around seven hours.

It was morning now, so that meant the ceremony would be underway any second now. A fact that Akio was deathly aware of.

The five pulled up in front of the stadium, their vehicles all skidding to a halt.

The second that the screeching of the tires died down, the sound of screaming was very audible from inside of the stadium. The sounds of hundreds of people screaming for their lives would be a sound that Akio wouldn't forget anytime soon. It was chilling, to say the least.

"Fuck!" Akio shouted, punching his steering wheel.

"What is that screaming?!" Ryuko exclaimed.

"Sounds like it started," Aikuro replied and hopped out of his vehicle, running to the trailer behind it. "Let's hurry!"

Everyone followed suit, preparing themselves for the battle ahead.

Akio ran over to the passenger side of the car, reaching in and carefully placing the backpack back on his body.

"I'll use this DTR to jump us to the stage in one go," Aikuro said, bringing Akio back to reality. "Come on, Tsumugu! Akio! Ryuko!"

"You mean Dotonbori Robo?" Ryuko foolishly corrected.

"DTR!"

"It's Dotonbori Robo, right?" She continued.

"DTR!"

"He hates that name," Tsumugu sighed as he climbed on to one side of the DTR, while Ryuko climbed on to the other. It would be tight for Akio to fit, but he could make it work.

Climbing up near Ryuko, he positioned himself directly next her, squeezing himself in so much that they were basically on top of each other.

"Wow, this is really comfortable," Ryuko deadpanned.

"It could be worse," Akio grinned.

Ryuko rolled her eyes, but didn't throw out any more complaints.

"Wait, what about me!?" Mako cried and ran up to the DTR, trying to climb onto its legs but failing miserably.

"I slipped off! There's nowhere to grab on!"

"Mako, I'm sorry, but you are *not* coming with us this time," Akio declared and slapped the side of the DTR to signal Aikuro to go. "Go and hide and I'll bring you a treat later."

"Right!" Aikuro shouted. "DTR going airborne!"

Mako nodded at Akio's statement, then began to wave farewell to the four.

"Have fun storming the stadium!" Mako called after them.

The DTR's thrusters erupted with fire, sending the DTR shooting up into the air like a rocket.

"Tch!"

Akio stumbled, nearly losing his footing if Ryuko hadn't snaked a hand behind her to grab a hold of his back.

The DTR flew towards the wall, its metal leg pushing off of the concrete and forcing itself upwards. After a few more repeated motions of this, the four made it up and over.

Akio almost wished they hadn't. He stared wide eyed at the lifeless arena around him, his heart going a million miles a minute inside of his chest.

Each and every citizen in attendance was wrapped in a cocoon of Life Fibers. The silence was deafening. Compared to the screams earlier, this was way worse in comparison. There was not a single sign of life other than the Kiryuins and their assistants, along with the Elite Four on the platform in the center.

They were too late.

The DTR landed on the platform's walkway, and the three immediately jumped off, while Aikuro stayed inside to man the DTR.

Ryuko leveled her sword at the Kiryuins in the center.

"I'm putting an end to this, Satsuki Kiryuin! Turn everyone back to normal!"

Akio tuned her shouting out, his eyes still on the hundreds of Life Fiber cocoons that filled the bleachers. What happened now? Were they dead? Were the Life Fibers leeching their life force?

How many of them did he know? Was Mako's family here? Was his?

A hand grabbed onto his shoulder, giving it a soft shake.

"Don't lose yourself."

Akio blinked and turned his head towards the owner of the hand.

Tsumugu was staring firmly at him, but underneath his usual hard glare was a trace of sympathy.

"Keep a level head, and we'll be able to fix this."

Akio nodded dumbly and turned his attention back to Ryuko, who was still brandishing her blade at her enemies.

"Oh, so you are Ryuko Matoi?" Ragyo asked, turning her head to face the intruders. Akio shivered at the sound of her voice. It was ridden with immoral elegance, like that of a seductress or witch.

She certainly looked the part. With her gaudy dress with rainbow colored highlights, as well as her white hair with similar rainbow colors dyed in, she looked like something out of this world. Her face even reminded Akio of that of a snake. If he didn't know any better, he would be expecting a forked tongue to flick out from between her teeth.

Her eyes were the worst part. When they fell on you, it was like she was looking *into* you, and not at you. It was as if she could sum up everything about you with one glance. Her red eyes were cold, calculating. Now he knew where Satsuki inherited her glare from.

Behind her stood Satsuki and the Elite Four, along with Ragyo's assistant Rei. Apparently the entire freak show was in attendance.

"You're-"

"I see," Ragyo continued, cutting her off. "And that is Kamui Senketsu? The fruits of Isshin Matoi's last, futile efforts. I must say, I didn't expect it to be so beautiful."

Akio took a step towards Ryuko to stand beside her, but he kept his mouth shut. This was a conversation he wanted no part in, but that didn't mean he didn't want to support Ryuko.

His hand lingering around his Goku uniform's zipper, Akio took a few breaths, calming his jumpy nerves and rapid heart. Waiting for this fight to start felt like waiting on for his own execution.

"So you're Ragyo Kiryuin, huh?" Ryuko spoke up. "I swear, you Kiryuins love to talk down to people!"

"I do. I am the one who knows everything in this world. I am the leader of the Kiryuin Conglomerate, Rag-"

Ragyo's sentence was cut short by the blade that emerged from the center of her chest.

Blood flew from the wound, splattering to the ground and tainting the pure white stage with its red.

"Wha?"

Akio's face paled, his body unconsciously taking a step back from the scene.

He couldn't even think. His brain had short-circuited. All he could say was-

"... What?"

Because, the owner of the sword that had been pushed through Ragyo's back, was none other than her daughter. Satsuki Kiryuin.

The confrontation did a complete turnaround in the blink of an eye. The hostility that Ragyo and everyone else had been emitting had disappeared entirely, replaced with surprise and shock. He had been expecting a fight, not... this.

"Ngh... W-what are you playing at, Satsuki?"

Satsuki's head appeared above Ragyo's shoulder, her usual cool blue eyes filled with loathing and disgust at the woman before her.

"The time for speeches is over, *Director*," Satsuki replied coldly, making sure to emphasize her last word.

Satsuki pushed the sword further in, causing more blood to spew from the wound and Ragyo's mouth.

Akio gaped at the scene, his body shivering as a few stray drops of blood rained down on him. It was... revolting. Never had he seen such a sight.

Using the sword to lift Ragyo off of the ground, Satsuki screamed as she brought the sword forwards and flung Ragyo across the stage.

Her body slammed into one of the giant Honnouji Academy symbols, the spikes from the statue punching through her chest and wrists. After a few seconds pause, blood began to spout from her chest, causing even more of the red liquid to rain down on everyone.

"Dear god," Akio mumbled, his eyes transfixed on the carcass hung up by spikes. It was something straight out of a nightmare.

With the still steaming blood smeared on her Bakuzan, Satsuki Kiryuin raised her head and straightened her back.

"As of this moment, Satsuki Kiryuin and Honnouji Academy are in rebellion against you, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

"W-what the hell?" Ryuko stammered, her eyes as wide as Akio's.

"You're trying to take the throne from me?" Ragyo sneered as blood bubbled around her lips.

"No, I'm not!" Satsuki shot back, raising her Bakuzan. "People do not live for the sake of clothing! I, Satsuki Kiryuin, am rising up to overthrow Life Fibers!"

If it was possible, Akio's eyes widened even more. Not only at the announcement of Satsuki rebelling against her mother and the Life Fibers, but simply by looking at Satsuki herself. She didn't look like the usual ice queen that Akio had come to know and dislike in his time at Honnouji Academy. No, she was anything but that right now.

With her long, black hair flowing in the wind, the blood on her sword and body, and the crazed look in her eyes, she looked like a depraved warrior.

Satsuki leveled her bloodied sword at Ragyo, giving her a glare that would send shivers down the spines of most men.

"Honnouji Academy is the fortress I created in order to defeat you! Remember that, Ragyo Kiryuin!"

Akio, Aikuro, Tsumugu, and Ryuko all stood motionless, watching the scene play out in a stupefied wonder. None of them dared to move, let alone take a breath.

Satsuki stepped forwards, her heel clicking on the platform.

"I pretended to obey you as I waited for this day to come!" She continued. "Fear is freedom! Subjugation is liberation! Contradiction is truth! These are the truths of this world! Surrender to those truths, you pigs who fawn over clothing!"

"What foolishness!"

Rei, Ragyo's secretary, stepped to Satsuki, whipping her arms forward.

The sleeves of her outfit sharpened and flew like missiles towards Satsuki, only to be blocked by a giant copy of the Honnouji Academy rule book.

"Over my dead body!" Gamagoori shouted from behind the shield as the three stars on his collar began to glow. "Shackle Regalia MKII!"

"Crap," Akio cursed, finally snapping out of his spell. Grabbing Ryuko by the arm, he backpedaled a few steps. "We should get back and watch how this plays out."

Ryuko nodded dumbly, allowing herself to be pulled away as her eyes stayed glued to the commotion on the platform.

Half a dozen Disciplinary Committee members appeared on the scene, literally binding Rei with their red tape.

"Inumuta, release everyone."

"Understood."

With a few button presses on his tablet, Inumuta had released the mini-guns that were hiding in the walls, and let loose a barrage of acupuncture needles on all of the Life Fiber cocoons.

After a few seconds, the Life Fibers exploded, freeing everyone from their deadly grasps. It was almost too good to be true.

Akio turned to face his brother and Tsumugu, who were still as stunned as he was.

"What do we do?"

"N-nothing for now," Aikuro stammered, his eyes darting back and forth. "Just wait and see."

Akio nodded. That made sense. If... if Satsuki really had the same plans as Nudist Beach had, then they could hold off and wait to see how this all played out. If Satsuki and her Elite Four did their job for them, more power to them.

"You high school student scum..." Ragyo mumbled from her spot, her voice just loud enough for Akio to hear.

"You'd do well to not underestimate them."

The rows of students that were lined up down below in the stadium all threw their fancy clothes into the air, revealing their white and gold school uniforms underneath.

"Every last student here has been trained as a warrior to fight you-no, to fight Life Fibers! Behold the power of Honnouji Academy!"

It was just one more revelation that shocked Akio to his core. The entire school was behind this? How did he *never* hear about this in all of his time as an undercover agent? Even if his cover was blown from day one, you'd think at least *one* student would have let it slip.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the pink demon known as Nui Harime take the field, but was intercepted by Uzu Sanageyama. At least he wouldn't have to worry about her for the time being.

"Satsuki's taking out her own mother?" Ryuko muttered from her spot beside Akio.

"Apparently so," Akio replied, his teeth grinding together inside his mouth.

"Just what the hell is going on?!" Tsumugu exclaimed, an unusual outburst from the man.

"I just don't know," Aikuro grimaced. "All of this is out of the blue for me, too."

"Matoi."

The four flinched, all turning to their right to see a giant television screen with Gamagoori's face plastered on it.

"Lady Satsuki intended from the very beginning to fight the Life Fibers. But to deceive Director Ragyo, she could not allow her true intentions to show in the slightest."

"Then what the hell was you guys fighting me and Nudist Beach all about?!" Ryuko shouted back, with Akio nodding along with the sentiment.

The screen switched over to Satsuki.

"I have no need for half-baked allies," Satsuki answered calmly, surprisingly so given that she had just *stabbed* her mother. "If my

forces could defeat you, you couldn't possibly win the war against the Life Fibers."

"But why?" Akio spoke up. "Why the deceit? Even if your plans were discovered from the get go, we could have joined forces and fought your mother together."

"It wouldn't have worked out that way, and you know that just as well as I do, Takahiro," Satsuki replied and turned her head to Ryuko. "If you won't like my way, I will fight you afterward. But if your ambition is to protect humanity's freedom, fight now with every ounce of your strength!"

"... That is my ambition," Akio whispered to himself.

Akio was ready to step forward when the lights from the Kiryuins brightened, nearly blinding everyone in attendance.

"Your ambition is impressive," Ragyo interjected, even with the blood spilling from her mouth. "You have no qualms about literally stabbing your mother in the back?"

"Of course not! I'll use any means necessary to defeat a monster like you!" Satsuki countered. "Even if it invites a scorn as a conniving villain, I gladly welcome it!"

"You call your own mother a monster?"

"A woman who is unfazed by being stabbed through the heart shouldn't say that."

That's right... Why wasn't she dead yet?

As if to answer Akio's unsaid question, the wounds on Ragyo slowly began to heal, leaving nothing but a small blood stain in their wakes.

"You monster that merged with Life Fibers and forsook her humanity!"

"Impossible..." Akio breathed. Never, even with his experiences in Nudist Beach, had he seen something such as this.

"I am no monster. I am merely a being..." Ragyo paused to wipe the blood from her chin. "Who has come closer to the truth."

Satsuki frowned and pulled out a remote, pressing down on a button.

Two handcuffs shot out from the statue Ragyo was impaled on, latching on to her hands and locking them in place.

Meanwhile, Uzu and Nui's battle moved to the platform that Akio and the others were standing on. Within seconds, the rest of the Elite Four appeared to support Uzu. Their fight proved explosive, as it only took a moment for a whole section of the stadium to get destroyed.

Akio growled and took another step back, grabbing Ryuko and pulling her back with him. Things were starting to escalate, and he still had no clue on what to do.

"Everyone! Please run away!"

Akio's eyes widened, his head turning to the new voice.

There, standing in the destroyed bleachers next to Gamagoori, was Mako holding a megaphone.

"Mako!" Akio yelled, but it was no use.

Using her father's truck and a plate of food, she began to lure away the injured spectators to safety. While it was awful convenient of her to do so, the fact that she was here still worried Akio greatly.

"RAGYO!"

Akio flinched and turned back to Satsuki and Ragyo, silently cursing himself for zoning out for a brief moment.

"In the name of human liberation, your life is forfeit!"

"Lady Ragyo!"

Rei broke from her bonds and jumped towards Ragyo, hoping to save her before Satsuki's blade got there.

"Damn it, if you're going to do it just do it already!" Akio yelled, raising a fist at her. This was stupid! The longer they talked the longer Satsuki was putting off the 'human liberation.'

"Don't interfere!" Satsuki shouted at both of them and brought her blade around, cutting Rei in half.

Except, that she didn't.

Both Rei *and* Ragyo had disappeared.

"No..." Akio muttered, lifting his head and looking every which way for them.

" ***Hahahaha... HAHHAHA!*** "

Ragyo's chilling laughter broke through the silence, causing the hair on Akio's neck to stand up on end.

"Satsuki, I will help myself to your troops."

"What?!"

Akio turned on his heel, looking down at the students in the courtyard below. In the midst of them stood Ragyo and Rei herself.

Outstretching her arms above her, hundreds of rainbow colored threads were flung from her hand, each one of them landing on a student and turning completely red.

The crowd of students stood stark still, their eyes wide open and lifeless.

With a flick of her wrist, the disorientated crowd of students formed ranks all around Ragyo.

"Mind control?" Akio breathed. "Such a thing is possible?"

"That bitch!" Ryuko cursed, much more loud with her surprise. "She turned all the students into her puppets!"

"Hmph, this is Mind Stitching," Ragyo explained smugly. "I have sewn my basting thread into their brains."

Ragyo tugged on the red string on her hand, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

"Get her, my puppets."

The students answered her beck and call, all of them jumping into the air and charging directly at Lady Satsuki. Satsuki remained unfazed by the charging army. Slapping down on the bracer on her arm, she activated her Junketsu.

"Don't hold back!" She yelled as her Kamui came to life. "Consider anyone who attacks you to be the enemy! Until Ragyo is defeated, turn your hearts to steel!"

With that said, Ragyo raised her Bakuzan and leapt into the fray.

Akio gritted his teeth, doing his best to fight down the bile rising up in his throat. While it made him ache to think about it, he knew what come next.

It was time.

Shrugging off his back pack, he set it carefully on the floor, then moved his hand to the zipper of his jacket. With one quick motion he tugged it upwards, and in turn activated his Three Star uniform.

"Three Star Goku Uniform: Unlimited Regalia!"

Closing his eyes, Akio raised his head as the straps of cloth that made up his uniform began to swirl around him, slowly enveloping his body in a tornado of black. Three white stars circled around him on the outside of the vortex, the three connected by a single, thin line. He was still unaccustomed to the transformation process. The heat that assaulted his body as the Life Fibers swirled around him... it felt like a tanning booth.

Without a moment's notice, the straps and stars collapsed onto his body, encasing him in the familiar black armor of his activated Goku uniform.

He felt the bandolier strap itself to his chest, as well as the spare ammo pouches strap to his thigh.

When he opened his eyes, green light shone brightly from the eye sockets of his helmet.

"Wait just a damn minute, Kiryuin!" Ryuko called after her, not noticing Akio's transformation nor the brainwashed students clamoring towards her.

Finally turning her head to her left, Ryuko's eyes widened at the mob of students out for her blood.

However, with a barrage of needles from Aikuro's DTR, the mob collapsed to the ground, completely unconscious.

"Ryuko!" Aikuro shouted as he appeared on the scene. "Leave this to us! You deal with Ragyo!"

Aikuro's eyes moved to Akio, giving him a nod. Akio nodded back and reached down to grab his backpack.

"Alright, Ryuko," Akio said as he stepped to the edge of the platform. "Let's get this over with."

Ryuko nodded and prepared to jump over the side, but hesitated at the last second.

"Just... Just be careful, okay? We're going to leave here together, you got that?"

Akio closed his eyes and smiled inside of his helmet, this all going unseen by Ryuko.

"Of course I will. You make sure to do the same, alright?"

"Right!"

And with that, the two jumped over the side, their bodies plummeting towards the ground surface about thirty feet below them.

The two hit the ground with a thud, and immediately the waves of brainwashed students were on them.

The battle had begun.

Akio steeled his heart and dodged the clumsy swing of the first student. Raising his arm in the air, he slammed his elbow into the back of the student's head, knocking him unconscious.

With one student down, ten more took his place. Setting down his backpack, he raised his fists, readying himself for another fight.

Akio growled, but charged forwards at them nonetheless.

Jumping and twisting around in the air, Akio brought his leg around and kicked the first student in the head, sending him barreling into the other nine and knocking them all over in the process.

"Well, this isn't too hard," Akio said to himself, but unknowingly he'd soon regret that statement.

The same red string that was controlling the brains of all of the students in the coliseum wrapped itself around Ryuko's body.

"Huh?"

Akio's eyes widened, his feet already moving towards Ryuko.

"Ryuko!"

Before he could even half the distance between the two, the string lifted Ryuko up and into the blue sky.

"RYUKO!"

Akio released his wrist blades, running over to the red string to cut it in half. Before he could do any of that, a giant red light exploded in the sky, nearly blinding him and causing him to stop completely.

Within seconds Ryuko's body collided into the ground, sending smoke and dirt up in the air

"Shit!" Akio cursed, raising his arm to ward off the wind and dust.

When the smoke cleared, Ryuko could be seen once more. Except now her body and clothing were completely white, just like the rest of the brainwashed students around them. Her eyes were two, grey holes; lifeless and empty. Her teeth were barred, and her nostrils flared. The only color coming from her was her scissor blade in her hands.

"Such a shame," Ragyo sighed, and with a movement of her finger she sent Ryuko flying towards Satsuki.

"AHHH!"

Ryuko twirled her blade, her hand clamping down on the hilt when the tip was pointed directly at Satsuki's neck.

Satsuki rose her blade to block it, but before she could do that, Akio jumped between the two.

Crossing his arms and raising them above his head, Akio intercepted Ryuko's blade with his two wrist blades.

"Tch!"

The strike made his arms sore, sending shivers up and down his spine. His feet dug into the dirt as the strike pushed him back, but Akio didn't falter. The strike sent a shockwave flying behind him, kicking up dirt and destroying the ground directly behind him.

If his uniform hadn't been activated, he'd probably be dead.

"What are you doing Takahiro?!" Satsuki hissed from behind him, untouched by the shockwave. "You are a fool if you think you can stand up to her."

"Ryuko hates you, Satsuki," Akio replied through gritted teeth. "She *might* actually kill you if she was forced to."

Clearly, he didn't think the same would be said for him.

"This much power without Life Fiber synchronization? Magnificent," Ragyo purred from the throne she was now sitting in. "It's only a shame that this boy decided to intervene. Ryuko: kill him."

Akio's arms began to shake from the strain, leaving him with only one choice.

Pushing Ryuko off of her, Akio jumped back to create some distance between the two. However, it wouldn't stay that way.

The second Ryuko had recovered herself, she charged Akio swinging her blade in a horizontal slash at his waist.

Akio jumped in the air to dodge it, flipping over her and landing behind her.

Duck!

Immediately dropping to the ground, he dodged the retaliation strike that Ryuko had sent his way.

Pushing himself back up, Akio hopped away, readying himself for Ryuko's next attack. But, he left one of his wrist blades embedded in the dirt, this fact going unnoticed by Ryuko.

"AHHHH!"

Ryuko flew at him, raising her blade to finish him.

Akio smirked, whipping his arm backwards and then swinging it to the right. The discarded wrist blade was pulled out of the ground, and then was flung towards Ryuko. The blade missed her legs purposefully, but the red string still wrapped itself around them, tying her up and causing her to trip. Her scissor blade went flying, embedding itself in the dirt near Akio.

Now he had her!

Akio began to charge forwards, but in a matter of seconds Ryuko had slipped out of her bindings.

"Oh, shit."

Hopping back to her feet, Ryuko pounced forwards, raising her fist up behind her head to deliver a deadly punch on Akio's head.

There was no way he'd be able to bring his arm up to block it in time. He might be able to dodge it, but Akio had another idea. A much, much more risky one.

Akio stopped moving and stood straight, allowing Ryuko to charge at him unchallenged.

Closing his eyes, Akio exhaled slowly through his nose.

"AHHHH!"

Ryuko brought her fist back to deliver the blow, but at the last second Akio retracted his helmet back into his uniform, allowing his face to go completely unprotected.

Opening his eyes, Akio met Ryuko's lifeless ones, watching calmly as her fist barreled towards his face. At the last second, Ryuko's eyes twitched.

SMACK!

Akio continued to stand untouched, not even flinching at Ryuko's punch. How could he, when it wasn't thrown at him?

Blood dripped down from Ryuko's nose, an injury caused by her own fist. The blood stained her pure white body, bringing a bit of color back to the girl.

"Don't... screw... with... me..." Ryuko panted, her face twitching from the blow she delivered to herself.

The red strand of hair that Akio had grown so accustomed to began to glow bright red, then spun in a circle, effectively cutting the strings that were tied around her brain. And then, something that should have been plain impossible, happened.

"You can't tie me and Senketsu with a little string like this! You can't make me hurt him again!"

Ryuko reached into her own head, grabbing the discarded strings and pulling them out in one go. And with the strings gone, the color returned, leaving Ryuko looking as she always did- minus the blood seeping from her nose.

She fell to one knee, supporting herself by planting a hand on the ground as she panted, trying to catch her breath but failing.

"I knew you wouldn't go through with it," Akio grinned as he reached down to loop an arm under her armpit and lift her back up to the feet.

"I'm proud of you, Ryuko."

"I... said... I wouldn't... lose control again... didn't I?" Ryuko panted, wiping the blood from her nose with her wrist.

"I know," Akio grinned wider.

"I'd expect nothing less from someone who's been a constant thorn in my side," Satsuki commended her as she walked over the two, then turned her eyes to Akio. "Your quick thinking continues to impress me, Takahiro. Continue with your efforts, and we shall prove victorious."

Akio rolled his eyes at her overly formal way of thanking him, but he nodded nonetheless.

"Don't think I've let you off the hook, Kiryuin," Ryuko growled as she straightened her posture. "I've got a whole heap of bones to pick with you. But-!"

Raising her scissor blade to the sky, Ryuko pointed its tip at Ragyo on her throne at the top of the platform.

"-For now, I'm taking her down!"

"Truly, life is..." Ragyo paused, rubbing her chin as her lips curled up into a sadistic smile.

Ryuko brought her hand up to her mouth, her teeth grabbing onto the pull-pin on her wrist.

"... Most amusing!"

The spotlights of the stadium all turned towards the center, shining their light down right on Ryuko.

And with that light, came Nui Harime.

"Long time no see, Ryuko!"

"You!" Akio shouted and brandished his wrist blades. He had quite the bone to pick with Nui. Hell, probably everyone in this stadium did.

Nui glanced over at Akio and pouted at him.

"Awh, you're no fun. I want to talk with Ryuko, silly!"

"I'll show you-!"

Nui materialized directly in front of him, leaning towards him and smiling sweetly in his face.

Akio flinched, unconsciously taking a step back. How had she gotten there so fast!

Reeling himself in, Akio swiped at Nui with his arms, but before his wrist blades could even touch her, Nui slammed the tip of her parasol into Akio's abdomen.

"Gah!"

The slight touch sent Akio flying across the stadium, his body slamming into the concrete of the stadium's wall. The impact itself caused mold of his body to indent the concrete wall, and after a few seconds, Akio fell from the crater his body caused and fell to the dirt floor beneath him.

Akio pushed himself onto his knees, supporting his body with his arms as he tried to catch his breath. The strength that Nui possessed was inhuman! How could such a hit have so much force?

Swiping his arm across his eyes, he cleared the blood that had seeped down his face from the fresh wound on his forehead. With a hit like that, and his body happening to slam into a concrete wall, he got off pretty easy. Only one gash on his forehead? It definitely could be worse.

Lifting his head, he examined the battlefield before him. By all means it was a battle they were winning. Ryuko was now fighting against

Nui, easily out speeding her and overpowering her. Tsumugu and Aikuro had easily beaten all of the brainwashed students. With Ragyo now preoccupied with Satsuki, the students were essentially mindless zombies. It was no trouble for Tsumugu and Aikuro to finish them off.

They were winning, so why did Akio feel like something was off? This was all just too easy... Sure, they had all got roughed up a little bit, but this was Ragyo and Nui they were talking about. They were no easy customers.

Akio's eyes widened at the display on the large platform. Blood had once again began to rain down, the source of it coming from the headless body of Ragyo Kiryuin.

"She... did it?"

Satsuki had bested her?

That question was answered immediately. The answer was no.

The headless body of Ragyo punched Satsuki across the face, sending her sprawling across the platform's walkway.

And then, Ragyo *picked up her own head* and placed it firmly back on her body.

Akio snarled and rose to his feet, his eyes scanning the area for his fallen backpack. It wasn't too far off, and still left untouched. If he could just grab it, then pull out the-

He froze. Something was wrong. Something was wrong. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. This wasn't right. This wasn't right. None of this was right.

Slowly turning his head upwards, Akio gaped at the now red sky. And not just any red, but the same, shining red of Life Fibers. Despite its clear ominous meaning, Akio would be lying if he said he

didn't find some strange beauty in it. It was like admiring the thunderclouds before a storm. You knew what was coming, but you just can't turn your eyes away.

The red sky began to split apart all over the place as orange, glowing balls of fibers fell into the sky. Those balls of thread began to unravel into the form of a suit. And there were hundreds, if not thousands of them.

"It can't be..." Akio muttered. Those suits in the sky were COVERS.

Another explosion rocked the arena, causing Akio to turn his head, only to see the lifeless body of Satsuki Kiryuin hanging from the wall, just like his was only moments ago. Except in her case, her body was in much, much worse condition. It looked as if she had just gotten run over by a steamroller.

"You are a disgrace, Satsuki Kiryuin!" Ragyo's voice rang out, loud and clear, now wearing her Junketsu. Turning her head from her daughter to the ants below, she continued. "This is the fate that awaits any fool who dares oppose me- no, oppose the Life Fibers!"

"You bitch!" Ryuko screamed at her.

Akio bit his bottom lip, indecision written all over again, he didn't know what to do.

"This shows that Satsuki was never worthy to be a vessel of the Life Fibers," Ragyo smiled, slapping down the straps on her arm.

Ragyo was enveloped in light for a the briefest of moments before it died down, revealing the activated Kamui wrapped around her body. Her activated Junketsu was much, much different than her daughter's. While Satsuki barely had any of her body covered by the Kamui, Ragyo's outfit was less revealing, and the cloth covered most of her body. It only made sense that she could withstand it, given her connection to the Life Fibers.

In the blink of an eye, Ragyo's form disappeared.

Akio immediately knew where she was going.

"Ryuko!" He cried out, but it was pointless. By the time he had turned and began running to her, Ragyo was already behind her.

Ragyo thrust her arm towards Ryuko, her hand piercing through the center of her chest.

Akio's eyes widened, his body coming to a stop as he began to tremble uncontrollably. His brain screamed at him to move his feet, but he couldn't. None of his limbs worked. His lungs were even refusing to take in breath.

The worst part was that he was close enough to hear the pained gurgles coming from Ryuko.

She... She had... Ryuko... Ryuko was...

Ryuko's chest began to glow a bright red as Ragyo's hand moved upwards and outwards. Taking a hold of her heart, Ragyo pulled it out of her chest.

Her heart was the same shining red as the Life Fibers.

"N-no..." Akio stammered, his face paling.

"Ryuko Matoi, you are one whose body has merged with Life Fibers, just as mine has," Ragyo told her calmly. "All this time, you were the daughter I believed to be dead."

Akio's eyes widened even further, his face going from a surprised look to one of a crazed man. This... this was too much for him to take. He could feel his mind beginning to crumble. If this was his reaction, he couldn't imagine what Ryuko was feeling.

Only one thing could tear Akio's unblinking eyes away from the girl he loved.

The screams of terror coming from his other best friend.

"I'm being pulled up!" Mako screamed off in the distance.

Akio whipped his head around, his face paling even further at the sight of Mako being pulled up by one of the COVERS.

What should he do? Go after Ryuko, or try and save Mako?

Taking one last look at Ryuko, he turned and ran towards Mako. Ryuko was still alive due to her... condition, but Mako might not be in the next few seconds if Akio didn't make it to her. He couldn't just stand there and gawk at Ryuko any longer. If he did, he might truly go insane.

"Mako!"

Mr. Mankanshoku tried to reach her, but missed.

"Please, please, please," Akio begged his legs to go faster, even if his brain was still muddled. With each step his feet slammed on the ground, pushing himself faster and faster towards Mako. He couldn't lose Mako after all that she had done for him. And after what he had just witnessed happen to Ryuko... he couldn't bear the thought of Mako coming to harm.

She didn't do anything to anyone... Mako Mankanshoku was the nicest person Akio had ever known. He couldn't let something as grisly as this happen to her. Of all the people, she was one of the few who deserved it least.

"Mako!" Mrs. Mankanshoku cried.

"Some-bo-dy-help!"

Akio wasn't the only one running towards the dangling Mako.

Gamagoori barreled past Mrs. Mankanshoku, planting his feet in the ground and jumping to reach out to her.

"Cut the thread! Escape, Mankanshoku!"

Gamagoori reached out to grab her, but he was too far away, and gravity was already working against him. The same couldn't be said about Akio, however.

Jumping into the air, Akio landed on Gamagoori's back, taking a few steps on his gigantic body before planting his foot on his head and shooting himself towards Mako. Grabbing a handful of knives from his bandolier, he flung his arms out towards the string holding Mako as he flew through the air. It was a good attempt, but another COVER intercepted his knives, blocking them with his body.

"Takahiro!" Gamagoori exclaimed, partly surprised and partly hopeful that he might be able to make it to her.

The minute Akio had jumped off of Gamagoori, several COVERS tackled Gamagoori, bringing him back to the ground with force.

"Mako!" Akio yelled, outstretching his hand. It was his last hope, at this point.

"Akio!" Mako cried back, reaching out to grab on to him.

Their fingers brushed against each other, but Akio couldn't get a hold.

Not going to let her slip through his fingers, Akio brought his other hand up, grabbing onto Mako by the shoe before he could fall back to the ground.

"Akio!"

"I've got you, Mako!" Akio shouted, bringing his other hand up to grab her by the leg. "Don't worry, I've-"

Three COVERS slammed into Akio's body, ripping Mako from his grip.

"NOOOOO!" Akio screamed frantically, his eyes wide in fear. "LET GO, DAMN IT!"

Akio punched and stabbed at the COVERS that had tackled him, but it was no use.

"MAKO!"

"Akio-!"

As he fell to the ground, time seemed to slow down. The three COVERS had wrapped their arms around his body, forcing him back to the ground. In his hand he held Mako's discarded shoe, his grip tightening around it as if that would somehow change the outcome.

Akio called out her name one more time, the action being mirrored by Mako.

Their eyes met one last time in that brief moment.

They shared a single meaningful look before Mako was sucked into the COVER for good.

"NOOOO!" Akio sobbed, ignoring the pain as his body slammed into the ground. The pain was what he deserved.

Gamagoori came running to his aid, kicking the COVERS off of Akio and pulling him to his feet. Akio was lifeless as Gamagoori pulled him up, his eyes still trained on the sky above. He still couldn't believe it...

Was... was Mako gone? Was she...

Mako hadn't done a thing wrong! She was a kind, teenage girl, who would help anyone in need! Hell, she had even unknowingly helped their enemies twice now. Some might say her over trusting nature might be a flaw, but to Akio, it was one of the best things about her.

Because he knew that no matter what he did, she would always be there for him.

But now... but now...

Akio closed his eyes, fighting back the urge to cry. That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Gamagoori placed a hand on Akio's shoulder, giving him a reaffirming squeeze.

"I'm sorry, Takahiro. We can still save-"

"Don't you *dare* fucking touch me," Akio growled and stepped away from him, dropping Mako's shoe on the ground.

"Takahiro..." Gamagoori gasped. "Where are you going?"

Akio didn't respond, his feet pushing him towards the discarded backpack. With every step he took, his face twisted more and more into a barbaric snarl, his eyes trained on Ragyo.

He was going to *kill* them. When he was done with them, their blood and guts would be raining down from the skies. He'd rip their heads from their bodies and put them on pikes outside the school gates. He'd revel in their blood, bask in their death. Just looking at her made his blood boil. This, all of this, was the Kiryuins' fault, and they were going to atone for it with their blood. Fuck his original plan of being a distraction as the others escaped. He was going to burn this bitch.

Picking up his backpack, he reached in and pulled out the detonator. Unknown to him, Satsuki was pulling out one of her own.

With his bag in hand, Akio continued walking towards Ragyo and Ryuko, who were now in a fight of their own. Well, Ryuko was fighting, while Ragyo just dodged every strike.

"HEY!" Akio shouted at the two.

Ragyo reached up and snatched Ryuko's arm, flinging her away and turning her head towards Akio. With her throwing Ryuko away, she was actually doing Akio a favor.

"Oh, if it isn't the boy," Ragyo sneered. "Does the pawn fancy himself a knight in shining armor, come to save the damsel in distress?"

"No," Akio snarled, flinging his backpack filled with C-4 at Ragyo. "I hope you burn in hell you demonic bitch."

Ragyo didn't budge an inch, only tilting her head to the side at Akio's action.

Raising his hand, he pressed down the single button on the detonator, unknowingly in sync with Satsuki.

Ragyo's eyes widened, but before she could react she was engulfed in a ball of flame.

Like a row of dominoes, several other explosions rocked the stadium, destroyed the stands and the platform in the middle. The bodies of Ragyo, Ryuko, Satsuki and Nui were flung every which way, their forms getting lost in the black smoke.

"What?!" Akio exclaimed, turning his head to the sky. Where did the rest of the explosions come from?!

The answer was obvious the moment he thought it over. Who else would think up a backup plan to their secret plans of rebellion? If she couldn't win, Akio would wager that Satsuki would take her own life if it meant taking her mother's with her.

He gritted his teeth as a barrage of rocks pelted his body, but he ignored the pain. The stadium was in tatters, and would collapse at any moment. He had to hurry.

"Damn it," Akio cursed and broke out into a run, his blinding rage beginning to simmer down a bit. He had to find her, before anything.

They could still escape under the cover of this confusion.

He ran through the thick black smoke, calling out Ryuko's name as he scanned the ground for her body. With the smoke and dust flying all around, it was nearly impossible to see, let alone breathe.

Doing the most logical thing, Akio brought back out his uniform's helmet, letting the familiar armor take its place once more on his head. At least now he could open his eyes and actually breathe without getting dust and dirt in his mouth.

There!

Akio fell to the ground beside the now unconscious Ryuko and Senketsu, picking her up by her arm and slinging her over his shoulder. Even at the rough movements of Akio, Ryuko didn't budge an inch. She was out cold, unsurprisingly.

Standing back up, he ran over to where he had last saw Aikuro.

He tried his best to ignore the beating of her heart. He... he didn't want to think about that right now. That was a whole other can of worms that he didn't have the time to think about right now.

"Akio! Ryuko!"

"Over here!"

Akio broke through the smoke cloud, making a beeline directly for Aikuro and Tsumugu.

"There you are!" Aikuro cried and ran over to the two, taking Ryuko from him. "We have to go, now! This whole place is about to collapse."

"I know. You better hurry up and get out of here before it completely collapses."

"You're still going through with this Akio?" Aikuro asked for the umpteenth time. "We could come with you. You'd be safer in numbers."

"No," Akio shook his head. "Take Ryuko and get out of here. I'll meet you at the base."

Not waiting for a response, Akio turned and ran away.

"Akio! Damn it!"

Akio ignored his brother's cries after him. Pushing himself even harder, he ran not to where his car was, but towards the heart of the city itself.

He panted as he ran through the city, his lungs burning a hole in his chest as he pushed his already tired body even further. He couldn't afford to give up now, not when he was so close to his destination.

Ignoring the fact that the COVERS were already flying above the city itself, Akio ran down a deserted alleyway, jumping over a few stray trash cans and ducking under a couple of clothes lines as he ran through it.

Exiting the alleyway, he found himself back on one of the main streets of Honnou City.

He had made it.

Running down the street, he found himself in front of the stairs that lead to the Mankanshoku residence, taking them two at a time as he flew towards the sha

The minute he reached the beaten down building, he threw his shoulder through the door, not even caring to stop and try and open it.

The door fell off its hinges without any resistance and he was back in the familiar living room of the Mankanshoku's home.

"Mom! Dad! Akiko!" Akio called out as he looked around the house. "Sukuyo? Bazarō? Matarō? Anyone?! Please, answer!"

Silence.

Akio swallowed the lump in his throat and began moving through the house, his eyes deliberately avoiding any family picture. He couldn't bear to think about that right now.

"Hello?!" Akio called out as he moved to the hallway, his head on a swivel. "Please, answer-!"

"S-s-s-stop right there, m-m-masked man!"

Akio flinched, turning on his heel to face the familiar voice.

Matarō stood on the other side of the hallway, holding a small knife out in front of him. Behind him, Akiko stood, her body trembling in fear as she gripped tightly to Matarō's waist.

"Akiko! Matarō!" Akio cried and ran to the two, falling to his knees as he deactivated his Goku uniform.

Matarō's eyes widened, the knife falling out of his shaking hand.

"A-Akio?!"

"Brother!"

Akiko ran out from behind Matarō, jumping into Akio's waiting arms and squeezing herself tightly against his body.

"B-brother!" Akiko wept into his chest. "Oh, I knew you'd come!"

"It's okay, I'm here now," Akio whispered, rubbing the back of her head.

"T-t-t-they," Akiko sniffled, burying her face further into her brother's chest. "They took Mom and Dad..."

"I know, I know," Akio replied soothingly. "But it'll be okay, I'll get them back."

Akiko let out a loud sob, her shaking grip tightening around her brother.

Akio looked up from Akiko to Mataro, who was watching the two sheepishly, a few stray tears of his own shining in his eyes.

He could guess why they were there.

"I'm so sorry, Mataro," Akio apologized, shame eating at his heart. "I promise you we'll get them back, too."

Mataro sniffled, rubbing his eyes with his wrists, but didn't say anything.

Akio outstretched an arm, inviting Mataro into their hug.

Mataro blinked at the offer, eventually breaking down and running into Akio's hug, wrapping his arms around them both.

"T-they, they got them!" Mataro sobbed, joining Akiko in her crying. "A-and I couldn't do anything to stop them!"

"It's okay," Akio replied and patted him on the back. "You did your best. I know that, and your family knows that. This isn't your fault."

Akio broke away from the hug, looking back and forth between the two of them.

"Let's get you two somewhere safe."

Akiko and Mataro nodded, both of them still sniffing a little bit.

CRASH!

Akio's head immediately snapped toward the loud noise coming from the living room. It was only a few feet away.

"Oh no, they're back!" Akiko whimpered, tears already flooding her eyes once more.

Akio turned to her, placing a finger to his lips.

Akiko nodded, placing a hand over her mouth to keep from accidentally making any noise, Mataro doing the same.

Taking a silent breath, Akio tiptoed down the hallway, peeking an eye around the corner.

His breath caught in his throat.

There were at least three COVERS in the living room alone, floating aimlessly in the center of the room. As Akio's eyes moved to window, he spotted at least another two dozen of them waiting outside.

Why so many? He thought to himself.

And then, his heart dropped into his stomach.

A bright, rainbow colored light began shining from right outside the window.

Why is she here?! Oh, god... oh, god!

This wasn't good. COVERS were one thing, but now *her* ?!

Turning and silently sprinting to where Akiko and Mataro were waiting on him, he got back down on one knee.

"You two need to leave. Go through the back, out the window in Ryuko's room. Once you get out, keep running and don't look back."

"Wha-?!" Akiko began to cry, but Akio placed a hand over her mouth to stop her.

"If you can, get to the sewers," Akio told Mataro. "I don't think they'd find you there."

Pulling out his cell phone, he handed it over to Mataro.

"Take this, and when you get somewhere safe call Aikuro Mikisugi or Tsumugu Kinagase. They'll get you somewhere safe."

Mataro nodded shakily and accepted the offered phone, sticking it into his pocket.

"I'm trusting you, Mataro. I know you can keep my sister safe."

Mataro nodded again, this time much more firmly.

"I won't let you down, boss."

Akio smiled, placing his hand on his head and tousling his hair.

"I know you won't. You're a good man, Mataro. I'm proud of you, little guy."

Akio then turned to his sister, removing the hand from her mouth and wrapping her in another hug.

"Go with Mataro, princess. He'll keep you safe."

"W-why can't you come with us?" Akiko whispered tearfully.

"I'm sorry," Akio choked out. "But you'll have to wait a bit longer for that."

Akio broke away from the hug, bringing his hand up to carefully wipe away a tear from Akiko's cheek.

"Why can't you come with us?" Akiko repeated, causing Akio's heart to shatter even more. "I-I don't want to be alone..."

"Don't be scared," He told her with a smile, placing a finger on her chest. "Because your big brother will always be with you. Never forget that."

Raising to his full height, Akio took a step away from the

"I'll see you both soon."

Akio met Mataro's eyes.

Grabbing Akiko's hand, Mataro tugged on it and lead her away and into Ryuko's room.

Akio sighed watching them go, wishing more than anything he could follow them. Maybe he could have. Except if he did, the COVERS would keep chasing them. If Akio provided a distraction while the two snuck out the back, they would go unnoticed as they slipped away. If someone as large as Akio was with them, they'd probably be spotted in a heartbeat. Even if he could fight them off, if Akiko or Mataro got sucked up by those... those *things*...

Tsumugu or Aikuro could probably save their parents and Mako. Even though it killed him to say it, it didn't have to be him that searched for them.

That is, if they were still alive.

Akio shook that thought from his head and stepped towards the living room. Ultimately, this would be for the best. He'd take down as many as he could while the other two escaped. That didn't stop him from feeling guilty for leaving Akiko, though.

Stopping right before the living room, Akio took a deep breath, his hand moving to the bottom of his zipper.

"Sorry, Ryuko..." Akio mumbled, hoping some way that she'd hear him. "I probably won't be there when you wake up this time."

Tugging upwards on his zipper, his Goku uniform came to life. This had been his plan from the get go, even if the circumstances had changed drastically. He hadn't been expecting the COVERS, nor the explosives from Satsuki herself. If it meant getting as many people as he could home safely, he'd gladly be the sacrificial lamb. As much as Ryuko would scream at him for that, it was the logical thing to do.

And the fact that Ragyo followed him here proved to be even better. It meant that she wouldn't be going after Ryuko and the others.

So, if Akio could hold her here, he could give them even more time to get far, far away from here.

"Three Star Goku uniform: UNLIMITED REGALIA!"

Akio stepped out of the shack, his hands clenched at his sides as he walked towards the two dozen COVERS lead by Ragyo and Rei themselves. Just looking at them, Akio could feel the hatred and anger he felt for them rise up again. He loathed Ragyo Kiryuin more than he thought could be possible. If only his explosives had done the trick.

"Hohoho," Ragyo chuckled as Akio walked towards them. "There's our little pawn. Did your family make it out alright? It'd be terrible if something were to happen to them right after your tearful reunion."

"Shut up!" Akio roared. "Stop talking as if you know everything!"

"Oh, but I do," Ragyo sneered. "I know everything about you, Akio Takahiro. Which is why I know you will make an interesting pet."

Ragyo extended a hand towards Akio.

"Bring me the boy. I have need of him."

Akio gritted his teeth, raising his arms and releasing his wrist blades.

If he was lucky, maybe he'd at least get to lay a scratch on that demon of a woman.

Author's Notes:

And there you have it!

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, as there will be a lot more of where that came from next chapter.

I don't have much to say really, so I'll cut this A/N short this time.

Thanks for reading everyone! And thank you all for your continued support of my story!

Until next time!

Thirty Days

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Lemme tell ya, this one was a very, very fun chapter to write. It was totally different than anything I've ever written before, and I highly enjoyed the test to my writing chops. There's many different scenes, POVs, emotions, and all that good stuff, which is somewhat new to my writing. I think it turned out well, but with a chapter like this you can never be sure.

Honestly, some day I might come back and write a little side story for this chapter in particular. There's so much I could do here, and so many ways I can take it.

Speaking of which, if you liked this chapter, go check out Badmitton's Strictly for the Birds. It's based on Satsuki's time in the cage, and it's excellent. Really great writing. I endorse it.

Before we begin, you should know that I changed the timeline up from the anime. In the show, there's an immediate one month time skip. In this chapter, the events will take place during that time, if the title wasn't indicative enough of that already.

Well then, let's get down to it! Read, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

Day 1

Cold. Cold and dark.

Pain. Pain and agony.

Heat. Heat and fever.

Wet. Wet and sticky.

Dead. Was he dead?

He wished he was dead. His body was in agony. He could feel a wetness on his chest, and a heat in his skin. He was dizzy; painfully so. His throat felt as if someone had force fed him a bucket of sand.

Akio whimpered, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he began to hyperventilate. Each breath caused his midsection to burn, no doubt thanks to a couple of broken ribs. He coughed, immediately regretting it as the movement caused the pain to spike.

"Aaaah," Akio moaned, his body writhing against whatever his back was leaning against. What had happened to him? Where was he?

Okay, first he was at the stadium. He was fighting with Ryuko when...

He let out another soft sob, this one filled with more sorrow than pain.

After all *that* had happened, he ran into the city to find his family. Only Mataro and Akiko were there. They escaped while he fought the COVERS and Ragyo.

... And Ragyo. Where he was knocked unconscious, but not before he got the shit kicked out of him. He proved to be no match for the woman, not by a long shot. Not a single attack of his was able to touch the fiend. For every strike he threw, he received triple that. She said... that she needed him, but even so, she sure didn't take it easy on him. At least he had been able to take out a few of those suits before he became incapacitated.

But where was he now?

Akio's breath caught in his throat when he heard a soft breathing of someone else. Someone else was in here with him, in this darkness. Where ever it was.

Open your eyes, his mind screamed at him, but he didn't want to. The pain was too great. He'd rather just fade away.

"No... no, no," Akio mumbled incoherently, his body squirming against the steel bars behind him. He couldn't give in that easily. Not yet. He had so much more he wanted to do with his life than to die here in the darkness. He had dreams he had yet to accomplish, stars he had yet to reach. People he wanted to be with, experiences he wanted to have.

Steeling his heart, Akio slowly opened his eyes, revealing the dark and drab room around him. His vision was blurry, but he could make out the steel bars around him, locking him in. A single ray of sunlight broke through the darkness, illuminating a figure in the middle of the cage, hovering above him.

The only sounds in the room were the sounds of labored breathing and the slight dripping of water somewhere.

He tried to squint his eyes to get a better view of whoever it was, but it didn't help. His vision was still to blurry.

Trying to reach out to the mystery figure, his hands were stopped mid-reach by the shackles locked around his wrists.

"Aaah," Akio moaned, weakly fighting against his shackles. He wanted to reach out and touch whoever it was. Just so he could feel the touch of another person's skin.

"R-Ryuko?" He whispered, his vision becoming more blurred as he struggled to stay awake.

The figure didn't respond. Maybe it wasn't a person at all. Maybe it was a hallucination.

Or... or maybe it was an angel to usher him into the afterlife.

As Akio slumped against the steel bars behind him, he was slightly comforted in the fact that maybe it was an angel come down to Earth to alleviate him of this pain.

Day 2

Satsuki woke to the sounds of water dripping, incomprehensible whispering, and pained breathing. Her eyes fluttered open, showing her the cage she was trapped in for the first time. She winced when she tried to move her arms, only now noticing the fact that she was hung up by her wrists with her arms above her head.

She bit her cheek to keep from letting out a groan. Her entire body felt sore and broken, but her shoulders were by far the worst, no doubt because of the fact that she had been hanging by her arms for God knows how long.

With the failing light of the falling sun, she was able to get a decent enough look at herself and the area around her to better assess the situation.

She was completely naked, with only her long black hair covering her chest and crotch. At least with the state of undress she was able to get a good view on her entire body. Her pale skin was covered in varying bruises, all of them colored a sickly purple or yellow. Other than that, her entire body was marred with different cuts and scrapes, but it was nothing too terrible. She felt incredibly fatigued, but from a quick rundown she could tell she didn't have any broken bones, thankfully.

After giving herself a once over, she turned her gaze to her cellmate.

"... Ryuko... Aikuro..."

Takahiro sat on the ground at the end of the cage, his body propped up against the steel bars as he writhed in pain. He was as naked as she was, but his chest and shoulders were covered in bandages and gauze, and his arms were shackled to the bars behind him. The bandages themselves were stained red with blood, some of it darker and dried, while some of it still looked moist and bright red. The parts of his body that weren't covered in bandages were covered in dark, purple bruises.

Satsuki unconsciously winced at the wounded man, her mind wondering what could have happened to him to have him end up like this. And more importantly, what was he doing in here?

"Mako... Akiko..." Takahiro continued to mumble names between shaky breaths.

They won't save you here, Takahiro, Satsuki thought bitterly to herself. The only person that would save him now was himself.

Satsuki closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. It was unsatisfactory that she found herself in this situation, but it was the price she paid for not succeeding in her mission of killing her mother. If she had got the job done in the first place she wouldn't be here right now, and neither would he for that matter. Her failure in execution put risk to all of humanity. That would not be acceptable.

It was on her shoulders to fix it.

But how?

And then, she remembered her false toenails.

A ghost of a smile flickered at Satsuki's lips. That would work. She'd just have to bide her time until her Elite Four came for her, or for when the Nudist Beach came for Takahiro to make an escape, otherwise it'd be pointless. Even if she could cut her chains and escape with Takahiro, there wasn't exactly anywhere they could go

to escape her mother and the COVERS, especially with his condition. So, the obvious choice was to wait until their ride arrived.

Speaking of which...

Satsuki looked back over to Takahiro. Just why was he here? There had to have been a reason, otherwise the COVERS would have just taken him.

There were only three options that she could think of to explain it.

One: he was bait. Takahiro was one of the higher ups in the Nudist Beach operation, and if her reports were correct, he was fairly well liked. Aikuro Mikisugi, his adopted brother, would come for him at some point, of that she was certain. Even if Mikisugi was more of a wait-and-see type, he'd come for him. And if the Elite Four came for her as well, Satsuki's mother could take all of them out in one fell swoop.

Two: Her mother wanted to make him suffer. There was any number of reasons as to why, but Satsuki knew that Ragyo would torture Takahiro for any one of them. She didn't exactly let go of grudges, otherwise Satsuki would be dead right now and not tied up. The fact that he had grown close to Ryuko and had thrown a bag of explosives at her topped the list.

The third and final reason that she could think of was that Ragyo had some intentions with him. Of what they could be, Satsuki had no clue. What could he accomplish that anyone else couldn't? It didn't make sense.

She already knew why she was here though. Ragyo just wanted to make her suffer, as she was still of use to her. That much was clear.

Satsuki took a deep breath. She might as well get started.

Swinging her hovering feet back and forth, her feet scraped against the ground. It would take a long while before the false toenail would

be sharp enough to cut through her shackles, but as of now, she had all the time in the world.

However, as fate would put it, she wouldn't have long to do that today.

The door to the room opened. Satsuki squinted her eyes at the bright light from the door, but soon enough the door closed, revealing the form of her hated mother.

Satsuki kept her expression emotionless and kept her body stone still. She'd give this woman nothing.

Except that Ragyo didn't walk over to her. She walked over to Takahiro.

Leaning down and taking a hold of his arm, she pulled out two syringes.

Satsuki's eyes widened.

"What are you doing to him?" She asked without thinking. She cursed herself for her outburst, but she had to know.

"Hohoho," Ragyo chuckled as she stuck him with the first needle and pressed down on the plunger. The action caused Takahiro to squirm, but his eyes remained clenched shut in pain. "I never took my daughter as the worrying type."

Satsuki remained silent, her lips set in a firm line. She wouldn't say another word. But... she had to know.

"Don't fret, I'm only keeping my little pet alive," Ragyo continued after a brief moment of silence. "I can't have him dying on me, can I?"

Satsuki's eyebrows twitched at the term 'pet,' but she remained silent.

"It's just a simple batch of antibiotics and painkillers, and his broken bones have already been set," Ragyo explained as she pushed another syringe into his arm. "It's incredible how frail the human body is. I only played around with him, and looked what happened? I suppose it's only the necessary punishment for not coming willfully."

Ragyo clicked her tongue and shook her head as she rose to her full height.

"That's what happens when you disobey your master."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed slightly. She was talking about him as if he was a dog.

Takahiro's eyes unclenched as the medicine took effect, and his body stopped twitching so much. To be honest, it relieved Satsuki slightly. It had been unnerving to watch him writhe around on the ground like that.

Ragyo opened up the cage and stepped inside, watching her daughter closely as she walked towards her.

"You, on the other hand, have certainly exceeded all of my expectations. In terms of your foolishness."

Satsuki turned her head down and closed her eyes, refusing to look her mother in the eyes.

"The students at the academies that Honnouji Academy had conquered have all been assimilated."

Satsuki grimaced internally at her mother's declaration, but she still remained emotionless. While that piece of information was disconcerting and regretful, there was nothing she could do about it. Victory required sacrifices, after all. And it wasn't exactly like she was in a position to do anything about it right now.

"If humans wear clothing for the first twenty years of their lives, their resistance to clothing completely disappears. Center your efforts around students in their late teens who haven't lost that resistance, and defeat me. But it was all for nothing."

Ragyo walked around to the other side of Satsuki, placing her ice cold palm on her backside. Satsuki steeled her heart and gritted her teeth. This was nothing new.

"The more your followers resist, the more they nourish the COVERS as energy sources."

Ragyo's hand moved down Satsuki's back and to her rear, softly rubbing her exposed skin.

"And before long, even your little sister will return to me."

"Little sister..." Satsuki muttered. "Ryuko Matoi...?"

"Yes," Ragyo replied, her evil smile evident through her tone. "To think that she was the baby that I had thought died all those years ago."

Satsuki began to tremble the longer she thought, Ragyo's words going unheard by her. Ryuko Matoi was her little sister...

"Soichiro had deceived me about a great many things," Ragyo continued.

"Matoi and I... are siblings..."

A small, small part of her steeled heart began to break away as a feeling of sadness and regret washed over her. If only she had known such a fact earlier... she wouldn't have had to threaten the life of another family member. Not that she felt any regret for her attempted murder of her mother, but if she had known of Ryuko's lineage from the beginning, maybe the two of them could have... -

"Soichiro faked his own death and entrusted his revenge to you," Ragyo stated, breaking Satsuki from her thoughts. "He changed his face and body to become Isshin Matoi, and not only did he raise the baby whose death he faked, he founded that silly Nudist Beach organization and gave a Kamui to Ryuko."

Ragyo laughed delightedly, as if this next revelation pleased her to no avail.

"Ignorant of all this, you earnestly believed everything he had said and crafted your rebellion plot against me.. It's so noble that it brings tears to my eyes! What garbage. As if a woman whose very tear glands are Life Fibers could cry."

Ragyo took her hand off of Satsuki's rear, then brought it back down to slap her.

"Even if that were the case, I am your mother. You should graciously accept any kind words I have to offer."

Ragyo raised her hand and slapped her bottom once again.

"Kind?" Satsuki whispered. "That doesn't suit you."

Ragyo brought her head around to look Satsuki right in the eyes.

"Are you sure?" She smirked and brought her hand down on her rear once more. "I'd like to think that my sparing your life was out of maternal kindness."

Ragyo's hand moved from Satsuki's back to her stomach, and inevitably to her chest.

"You're letting me live because I'm more valuable that way," Satsuki corrected. "The same goes for Takahiro. No more, no less."

"Oh? How so?"

Ragyo's hand moved from Satsuki's breasts to her rear end once more, giving it a firm squeeze.

"Shinra-Koketsu."

Ragyo's grin widened, her hand squeezing her slightly harder.

"You also know about that, do you?"

"I put two and two together."

"I see."

Ragyo brought her hand back and continued Satsuki's spanking once more, this time with more strength and frequency.

"In that case, I suggest you get the rage in your heart to seething!" Ragyo exclaimed, her face deteriorating into crazed, maniacal smile. "The deeper your rage, the more useful you are to me!"

Ragyo laughed delightedly, her pace quickening.

Satsuki remained emotionless, her eyes unmoving as she endured Ragyo's incestuous touching. It wasn't the first time she had gone through such a thing.

"G-get your hands off of her you sick f-freak..."

Satsuki's eyes widened, her head snapping to where Takahiro was leaning against the cage's steel bars beside her.

"Oh?" Ragyo purred, her smile widening even more.

Takahiro raised his head, his lidded eyes glaring daggers at Ragyo. Tilting his chin up, he spat at her.

"How could you do such a thing to your own daughter..." Takahiro mumbled, wincing at the pain caused by his own speaking. "You and Dr. Matoi didn't deserve the children you had..."

Takahiro groaned and arched his back, one of his eyes closing as he endured his pain.

"When I get out of here I'm going to rip your head off with my own two hands," Takahiro growled, his voice much firmer than it had been.

Ragyo chuckled and removed her hand from Satsuki's body, slowly stepping away from her and towards Takahiro. To his credit, Takahiro didn't look away as Ragyo stepped forwards, his eye unblinking as he stared directly at her.

"I was correct when I thought you'd be interesting, oh pet of mine," Ragyo spoke softly as she placed a hand on his head, giving him a few pats.

Takahiro roared and fought against his restraints to attack her, but if the pained expression was any indication he immediately regretted it.

"GAH!" He cried as he fell back against the steel bars, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he gasped for breath.

"It seems like you still need to be domesticated," Ragyo declared as she walked towards the room's door to exit.

Before she left completely, she turned back to Takahiro and smiled.

"I'll be back for you."

And with another bone-chilling smile, she walked through the door and closed it behind her.

"Aaaah," Takahiro continued to moan after his outburst, his body twisting and squirming in place. It appeared that the medication had stopped the pain from leaving him unconscious, but it was obvious he was still in a fair bit of discomfort.

Satsuki watched Takahiro for several moments, her expression blank. Why he had stood up for her was a complete mystery. Considering their past, she couldn't possibly be in his good graces. If she was in his position, she wouldn't waste her precious energy for such an outburst. And with the pain he was clearly going through, why even waste that energy to speak in the first place?

"Ngh..."

Satsuki sighed silently.

"If you continue to squirm like that, the pain will only become worse."

Takahiro ceased his squirming, his head turning to Satsuki. His expression was not pained or delirious, but filled with anger and pure contempt.

"Don't... don't you dare fucking speak to me."

Satsuki blinked, her eyes widening slightly at the unrestrained venom in Takahiro's tone.

"All of this... everything... it's all your fault," Takahiro spat. "You and your mother's fault."

Satsuki closed her eyes, not bothering to respond to his words. What would be the point? She wouldn't be able to change his view of her.

It was only one more person who despised her.

" *Like mother, like daughter.* "

Day 6

Akio's breathing was heavy, but his mind was clearer, and his pain was less. It wasn't gone, but it was bearable. The gashes that littered his chest were beginning to heal, which would no doubt leave a whole new batch of scars, which Akio was more than pissed about.

His two broken ribs, one broken arm, and broken collarbone were all mending, but they'd take months to heal fully. His fight against Ragyo would be his last for the foreseeable future. The only silver lining was that he could actually remain conscious without having to squirm and writhe around in pain. Although, with the drugs being given to him, it was certainly difficult to.

The past four days had all strung together, none of them differentiating from the other. They sat in the darkness, not speaking to each other, and barely even looking at each other. The only sound that broke the silence was the wretched scraping coming from Satsuki's toenails running across the ground.

No one else had come to talk to them. The only people that actually came to see them were the ones that gave them their bread and water so they didn't die of malnourishment or dehydration. The only other visitors were the people that came in to give Akio medicine or to change his bandages.

God, he'd give anything to get out of this place. With every fiber of his being he loathed being trapped in this cage. Each second he spent in here his heart ached more and more.

More than anything else, he wanted to be with Ryuko. How was she doing? Was she coping? Akio knew that the news that Ragyo had revealed to her was life changing, possibly even mind shattering. If he were in her shoes, he'd probably feel like a monster. A human infused with Life Fibers? It was almost unthinkable. Ragyo and Ryuko were the only known two, and that wasn't exactly the best company to be in for Ryuko. And knowing Ryuko, she had probably already cast herself out as a monster. If only he could be there with her... it hurt him to know that she was probably hurting, lost and alone in the confines of her mind. For her entire life, she had thought of herself as a human, and why wouldn't she? It's basically a guarantee. To hear that you weren't, and you were in fact part of the alien race that you were trying to stop, would drive most people insane. Akio only wished he could be there for her this time, more than anything.

He wanted to talk to Aikuro, as well. It felt like he hadn't spent quality time with his brother since back before he moved in to the Mankanshoku residence. Even when they were in Osaka, he only really saw him when they were discussing their plans and explaining things to Ryuko. To be honest, he missed talking with him, sharing a beer with him, just joking around with him.

He wanted to spend time with his sister. She was still so young and so innocent. All she wanted was to get to know her big brother better, and this is how he repaid her for that. God, it crushed him to know that her fifth birthday would be spent in this hell.

He wanted to see...

Akio ground his teeth. That's right. He couldn't.

"Do you feel any guilt for what happened?" Akio asked Satsuki, breaking the silence. "Are you sorry for what you've done?"

Satsuki didn't answer, only keeping her eyes straight ahead as her toenails scratched the ground.

"How many lives are going to be lost? How many *were* lost?" Akio continued undisturbed. "I can tell you a few, if you'd like."

Satsuki glanced over at Akio. "I know full well-"

"For one, there's my family and the rest of Honnou City. Are you proud of that?"

Satsuki turned her eyes back to in front of her, gazing into the nothingness as Akio continued to berate her.

"... What about Mako Mankanshoku? What did she do to deserve the ending she was given? She was just a regular girl who went to the school *you* created," Akio scoffed. "Who are you to force regular high school students to deal with your mommy issues? How many of your precious followers followed you to their own demise? And how

did you repay them for that loyalty? You made them fight for their right to live with a stupid ranking system."

"I didn't need half-baked allies, nor did I need weaklings. And those men and women followed me because they chose to, not because I forced them to," Satsuki answered calmly, turning her gaze back to Akio. "If I'm remembering correctly, it's as much your fault as it is mine that your family and Mankanshoku were absorbed by the Life Fibers."

"You're right, it is," Akio agreed, his expression darkening for a fraction of a second before it returned to its previous anger. "Except the difference between you and me is that I feel guilt over the lives lost."

"They're not lost yet," Satsuki corrected him. "They can all be saved."

"You better hope so," Akio growled. "Otherwise it's you who will atone for your crimes against humanity. You may have been against Ragyo since the beginning, but the fact of the matter is you still committed those atrocities, undercover rebellion or not."

"If we fail, I'll accept any punishment you deem fit," Satsuki replied coolly. "That is, if we're both alive."

"Oh, I'll make sure of it," Akio reassured. "When we both wind up in hell, I'll make sure you get the punishment you deserve... Even if I have to side with Satan himself."

Day 7

The rain poured down from the sky, masking the sound of running footsteps.

Honnou City was a ghost town. Nothing was left. The only inhabitants of the once lively town were those freaky, flying suits.

Just the sight of them scared Mataro half to death, but they wouldn't keep him tied down. If he didn't get food, they would starve before Mr. Mikisugi even showed up to save them. More importantly, he had to be strong for Akiko. Boss believed in him, and he wouldn't let him down anytime soon. Not after what he did for him.

They were able to reach Mr. Mikisugi using Boss's cellphone, who had assured them that someone would be on the way to evacuate them. That was six days ago. Mataro wouldn't let the fear get to him, but a small part of him was beginning to seriously worry. Someone should have been here by now. And with Boss's cell already dead, they had no way of reaching anyone else.

Mataro pushed his back against a wall, his hand gripping tightly to Akiko's and forcing her to do the same. Guts trotted up to the duo, standing on his hind legs and mimicking the two.

Peeking his head around the corner, Mataro scanned the vicinity for any of those creepy suits.

The coast seemed to be clear...

Keeping his grip tight around Akiko's hand, he ran out from the cover, crossing the dirty and muddied street to the vegetable stand that was across it.

The two dove into the cover of the stand, with Guys right behind them.

"Alright," Mataro whispered and pulled out three burlap sacks and handed one to Akiko and Guts. "Grab as much as you can and hurry!"

The two nodded and began shoveling vegetables into their bags, everything from tomatoes and carrots to celery and lettuce.

Mataro grimaced at the signs of rot on some of the vegetables, but beggars couldn't be choosers. They had to eat something, and

expired and stale junk food wouldn't cut it.

As he shoveled in tomato after tomato into the burlap sack, his eyes drifted to Akiko. Ever since her brother had left them, she had been incredibly quiet, scarcely speaking a word to him. The only sound she ever made nowadays was the soft crying before she went to sleep each night. It worried Mataro, but it was something that wasn't pressing. Survival came first. Boss had made sure to emphasize that point.

"Mataro," Akiko whispered, her head poking out around a box of veggies. "Here come some of those *things* ."

Mataro cursed and nodded, grabbing his bag and Akiko's.

"Let's roll out," He told the two as he ducked out of the stand, keeping his head low and hiding behind as much cover as he could. The two stuck to him like white on rice, using any possible thing as cover to keep them out of sight of the COVERS.

Mataro grinned to himself.

We made it!

Rounding the corner, the three made it clear of the most of the COVERS. All except one.

A lone COVER stood in their path, cutting them off.

Mataro gritted his teeth, pushing Akiko behind him.

"Get out of our way, you stinking business suit!"

Reaching into his bag of vegetables, he grabbed a tomato and lobbed it at the floating suit, staining its cloth with tomato juice.

"How ya like that?!" Mataro shouted as he took Akiko's hand and turned on his heel, leading the two in the opposite direction.

"AH!"

The minute his foot took a step, it landed on the pant leg of another COVER.

"Uh-oh."

Three red strings shot out of the COVERS' chests, snaking towards each of them and wrapping around their bodies.

"EEEEK!" Akiko shrieked, her legs kicking the air as she was lifted up.
"Mataro!"

"Oh, crap!" Mataro struggled against his bindings, even resorting to trying to bite his way through, but it was no use. Was this the end of the line for Mataro Mankanshoku?

"Guts! Guts, guts!" Guts, *the dog*, cried.

With a flash of pink, all three were cut from their bindings.

"Huh?!" Mataro looked down at himself, where the red fibers that were once around him had deteriorated into nothing.

"Turn into a rotten dust cloth!"

Their savior pounced at the COVERS, using her blade to cut the strings that were connected to their backs, which were giving them life from the Original Life Fiber.

With their strings cut, the suits fell harmlessly to the ground.

Mataro gawked at his savior. She was completely naked except for the ammo belt and ammo pouches that covered her most private areas. Her pink hair was tied into a bun that was stuck in a black hat that had a poorly drawn white skull on the front of it. She looked startlingly familiar...

"Hey, you're that Elite Four chick!"

Akiko looked back and forth between Mataro and Nonon, confusion written all over her face.

"Well, you called, didn't you?" Nonon grumbled, looking back and forth between the three of them.

Akiko stepped forwards, giving Nonon a deep bow.

"Thank you for saving us, ma'am."

Nonon tilted her head curiously at the girl, looking her up and down.

"So, you're Takahiro's sister, huh?"

Akiko blinked, her eyes widening. "You know my brother?"

"I did," Nonon frowned, her gaze turning to the skies above. "We need to get out of here. The streets are crawling with these scraps of cloth..."

As if to prove her point, a dozen COVERS began to descend on them from the overcast sky.

Mataro scanned the ground, finding a sewer opening not too far off. Running over to it and opening the hatch, he dropped in.

"Follow me!" He shouted, waving his hands frantically at the three.

The three followed right behind him, dropping down the ladder and into the sewer pipe it lead to.

"Ew..." Nonon grimaced as she looked around at the less than clean sewer pipe. "Yeah, this is *much* better."

"It's this way," Mataro told her as he took Akiko by the hand and began leading them down the pipe.

"What's this way?" Nonon asked, doing her best to avoid from stepping in something unsavory as she walked.

"Our hideout," Mataro answered and rounded a corner of the pipe.

After a few more minutes of walking, the four reached the end of the pipe, where all of them hopping out.

"Well, I'll be," Nonon muttered, slightly impressed with their living conditions.

The pipe lead them to a canal beneath a bridge, where signs of someone living there were written all over the place. Or, should she say, some people. Beneath the bridge was an impromptu shelter made of boxes and tarp. Outside of the shelter were a few other children cooking some piglets over an open fire, while another child seemed to be poking a dead pig for the fun of it.

The shelter was actually quite impressive. While it was made of boxes and tarp, it actually looked somewhat durable, and it definitely kept the rain and cold out. There was even a pipe attached to the roof that held a few plucked chickens and a couple shirts to dry.

"So you kids have survived on your own this past week like this, huh? You're that underachiever's brother alright, but your ability to survive is the one impressive thing about you."

Mataro shrugged, grinning as he placed his hands behind his head, clearly proud of what he had put together on such short notice.

"I made a promise that'd we'd make it out," Mataro replied. "And the name's Mataro, thank you very much!"

Nonon rolled her eyes, her eyebrows twitching when she caught sight of a few Nudist Beach operatives looking down on them from the bridge.

"Come on," Nonon told them as she took Akiko by the hand and motioned to with Mataro with the other. "Our ride's waiting over there."

A few hours later, the helicopter reached the Nudist Beach secret base, letting off its load of stranded citizens. The ride had been long, and at times quite dangerous, but the helicopter had been able to make it here in one piece. It was a silent trip, as none of the passengers had anything to say. They were too busy dwelling on their own thoughts and emotions, missing their own loved ones. Mataro and Akiko were no exceptions, in that regard.

Nonon hopped off of her seat, her feet hitting the steel floor and immediately walking away from the copter. Akiko and Mataro shared a look before they both shrugged and followed her.

After a few minutes the three, four counting Guts, stopped in front of two other men. The first one was a giant of a man with short blonde hair and huge muscles, while the other was a much smaller, more lithe guy with green hair. Mataro recognized them both immediately as two of the other Elite Four members.

"Good work," Nonon told the two without her usual venom in her tone. "Looks like you guys had it rough, too."

"Yeah," Uzu sighed, his head turned away as he looked off into the distance.

"Is that Mankanshoku's little brother?" Gamagoori asked as he eyed him over. His gaze shifted to Akiko, his eyes widening slightly. "Is this-?"

"Yep, Takahiro's sister," Nonon replied. "The pipsqueak said he and his friends had been living in the sewers under Honnou City. They're an impressive pack of rats, I'll give them that."

"I said the name's Mataro Mankanshoku, Elite Four chick!" Mataro raised a fist and shouted at her, while Akiko only turned her head away and frowned.

"And you can call me Lady Nonon, underachiever junior!"

Gamagoori turned his head to the three, having to lean over to actually make eye contact with them.

"If you want others to call you by name, address them properly first, Jakuzure," Gamagoori lectured her. "And it is impolite to call two so young a 'pack of rats.'"

"I'm ever so sorry, Mr. Disciplinary Chair," Nonon deadpanned and stuck her tongue out at him.

Akiko watched the three curiously, her eyes falling on Gamagoori. Walking up to the man, she lightly poked him in the shin.

"Did you know my brother too, Mr. Giant?"

"I did," Gamagoori answered as he lowered down to get on her level. "He was a good man. And please, call me Ira."

"Okay, Mr. Ira," Akiko nodded, a slight smile tugging at her lips. "Thank you."

Gamagoori returned the smile, causing Nonon to only roll her eyes more at the two.

"Ah, there you all are."

The group turned their heads to see none other than Aikuro Mikisugi walk up to them, carrying a clipboard and wearing a lab coat, but otherwise he was in all his naked glory.

Akiko tilted her head at the man, completely baffled by the state of his undress. Unfortunately, it seemed that the strange man was walking directly up to her.

"Well, hello there Akiko," Aikuro smiled reassuringly at her as he lowered himself down one knee. Holding a hand out for a shake, he continued. "I'm Aikuro Mikisugi, Akio's adopted brother."

Akiko's eyes widened, her eyes moving back and forth between the offered hand and Aikuro's face before she accepted the gesture and shook his one hand with both of hers.

"You're his brother?"

"That I am," Aikuro replied. "So I guess that makes us family, in a weird, sorta complicated way."

Akiko blinked, slightly confused but even more delighted by the turn of events. She had thought she was going to be all alone here, but maybe that wasn't going to be the case!

"Why don't I take you to go get something to eat, huh? I bet you're hungry. You're welcome to come along as well, Mataro, but your family is probably waiting for you."

Mataro nodded excitedly, closing the distance between the two in a second.

"Food first!"

"Well, um, alright," Akiko answered quietly.

"Then it's settled," Aikuro grinned as he rose to his full height. "Just let me talk with Jakuzure real quick, and then we'll be on our way."

"Jakuzure?" Nonon muttered, raising an eyebrow at the fast approaching Aikuro.

Day 14

Two weeks have passed. *Two weeks*, and nothing has happened. Each day had been the same, quiet darkness. Today would prove different, however, this fact unknown to Akio.

Akio's wounds had been healing decent enough, but his body was still in pain. The painkillers he was forced to take dulled the ache, but

they didn't completely get rid of it. He was suspicious of the medicine he was being given from the get go, but whenever he tried to refuse them, he had been restrained and they put the syringes in him regardless of his consent. Couldn't say he was surprised. He only hoped that they were actually painkillers and antibiotics, and not some other crap Ragyo was pushing into his bloodstream.

Everyday they came in they gave him the two syringes. Painkillers for the pain and antibiotics to prevent infection. By now he was so pumped full of drugs he could hardly think straight, let alone stay awake.

At least I have pleasant company. Akio thought dryly to himself.

Things with his only cellmate were still tense. Akio hated Satsuki for what she had done, even if the blame was on Ragyo's shoulders. He felt that Satsuki could have still done a better job. Hell, she probably had a thousand opportunities to kill her mother with her own hands, but she squandered each and every one of them. And if she actually knew that her mother was a Life Fiber infused human, why didn't she make sure she cut every strand of the neck? It was because her killing blow failed that all of this had happened, which is something that Akio had made sure to remind her of these past few days.

If only she had been as competent as she always acted. Maybe Mako would still be here. Maybe his family.

Maybe he'd be off with Ryuko somewhere, on a date. Maybe he'd be having a beer with his brother. But no, he was here in this cell with one of two people he hated more than anything in the world. Fantastic.

Even though his anger and hatred towards her was clear as day, Satsuki did nothing to try and dispute him. She only accepted his contempt, not bothering to try and change his mind. A small part of him questioned his hatred towards her daily, but a much larger part of him told him to squash that inquiry. It was easier this way. Hatred was always easier than acceptance.

The forced silence was broken when the door to the room opened, and in walked Ragyo, Rei, and Nui.

Satsuki raised her head, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of all three of them coming to visit.

Akio glanced over at them, but he kept his head down, avoiding their eyes. He would give these fiends *nothing* .

Satsuki's eyes traveled from the three to Akio. She knew what they were here for.

"What is it that you want?" Satsuki inquired regardless.

Ragyo ignored her daughter's question and walked straight over to Akio, key in hand. That finally caught Akio's attention, as he watched her walk towards him wide eyed.

"I have a proposition for you, Akio Takahiro," Ragyo purred as she pushed the key into the shackles and unlocked them.

Akio exhaled in relief when the metal shackles had finally been taken off of his hands. He gingerly rubbed the raw skin of his wrists, his eyes trained on Ragyo.

Ragyo walked over to the cell door, opening it up and pacing inside. Striding over to the man, Ragyo grabbed him by his shoulder and lifted him up, not caring what pain it might of caused him. With her other hand, her fingers brushed the scars on his face.

Akio's nostrils flared at the action, but he reminded stalk still. He would give them no reaction.

Satsuki watched on worriedly, but remained silent as well. Any input she had would only make matters worse.

Nui and Rei remained silent as well, Rei watching the scene knowingly while Nui played with one of her pigtails.

"It must be awfully lonely in here," Ragyo said after a moment's pause, her hand moving to his bare shoulders.

Akio closed his eyes and let a puff of air out of his nose, but didn't say anything.

Nothing.

"It's so dark and depressing," Ragyo continued, her hand moving to his chest. Akio shivered reflexively at her freezing palm, but otherwise remained still. "It must be killing you inside."

Akio's gaze shifted to her, curiosity in his eyes. Just where the hell was she going with this?

Ragyo smiled at the action. The fish had taken the bait.

"If only you had some company other than my fool of an eldest daughter."

Ragyo's head drifted to his ear, her lips only inches away.

"Like Ryuko, perhaps?"

Akio flinched.

"Hohoho," Ragyo chuckled and walked behind him, her fingers tracing lines across his chest as she moved. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Ragyo stopped behind him, both of her hands resting on his shoulders.

"Don't worry, I'm not offended that you didn't ask my permission first."

Akio's hands clenched at his sides, wanting nothing more than to turn around and wring her neck.

"And that's where my proposition comes in," Ragyo explained, one hand remaining on his shoulder as the other moved to rub his neck. She leaned forwards, pressing her lips to his ear once more. "Join me."

"What?" Akio gasped, finally speaking.

"Hehehe," Ragyo chuckled once more and motioned at Satsuki.

Rei nodded and walked towards the dangling woman, stopping front of her. Satsuki watched her curiously, but made no sudden movements. Without a moment's notice, Rei stabbed her in the arm with a syringe and pushed down on the plunger.

"What?!" Akio exclaimed.

Satsuki looked as surprised as he did, but within seconds her eyes closed and her chin fell to her chest.

"What have you done?!" Akio screamed, finally turning around to face Ragyo, his anger for her finally surfacing.

"She is only unconscious," Rei answered and left the cell.

"This is the truth," Ragyo agreed. "Couldn't have her listening in on our conversation, could we?"

"What is it that you want from me?" Akio snarled.

"Join me," Ragyo repeated, her lips tugging upwards in a delighted smile. "And I can give you everything you've ever asked for and more."

"And how would someone like you know what someone like me would want?" Akio scoffed, taking a step back.

"I know of your love for my daughter," Ragyo smiled and took a step forwards. "And soon, she'll be where she belongs. If you were to join me, you could be with her, just like you want. Forever and eternal."

Akio's anger was replaced by pure surprise and confusion. What did she mean by that? Ryuko would never in her right mind choose to team up with Ragyo. Hell, she'd probably take her own life first. What the hell was Ragyo thinking? He knew she was insane, but he didn't think she was an idiot. And what's the deal with that other shit? Forever and eternal? Was she promising him immortality?

"Yes, I am promising you that. With the power of the Original Life Fiber, I can grant you many things unknown to man."

Akio's eyes widened, his jaw dropping. How did she know what he was thinking?

"And I know about your hatred for my other daughter," Ragyo's smile turned predatory. "If you were to join me, I'd let you kill her here and now, with your own two hands. Or whatever else you wanted to do with her."

Akio's eyes moved to the chained up Satsuki, who was unaware to the conversation revolving around her thanks to her unconsciousness. Her head was tilted downwards, her mouth slightly open as she breathed in and out slowly. In her state of deep sleep, the permanent scowl that seemed to have been etched into her features was gone completely, leaving her looking like a normal teenage girl.

His hands clenched at his sides, his arms twitching in anticipation. With his own two hands...

Ragyo grabbed his chin and turned his head towards her, her eyes gazing deeply into his.

"What has been done cannot be undone," Ragyo purred as her other hand brushed his cheek. "The future is already written, Akio, and I am giving you a place in it. Why waste your precious life for something that can't be changed? The only logical course of action would be to join the winning side, and ensure your survival. But of course-"

Ragyo patted his cheek and pressed her lips to his ear once more.

"-You'd have to earn that place."

Akio unconsciously rose an eyebrow at that, which only spurred Ragyo on.

"For a human, you have exceptional genes," As she talked, her finger traced Akio's upper body. "Extremely fit, quite healthy, very intelligent and charismatic. You could make quite the offspring, you know."

Akio's eyes widened in terror as realization finally dawned on him. She... she wanted-

"With my Ryuko, you could make a being even greater than I," She whispered into his ear. "You could create a vessel for the Original Life Fiber that would surpass even me. It would be the start of a new race of human and Life Fiber hybrids. Your child could be a *god*. Your lineage would be the greatest there ever was. Are you not tired of being overlooked? Are you not tired of this world chewing you up and spitting you out?"

Ragyo stepped away from Akio and outstretched her arms to the skies, as if she were actually offering Akio the entire world on a silver platter.

Akio's mind wandered to the child Ragyo spoke of. His child... would he really be everything Ragyo promised? A god walking the Earth? Could his bloodline really gain that much power?

"I can give you everything you desire, Akio. The stars could be yours," Ragyo smiled at him, her red eyes boring holes into his. "All you need to do is give me your loyalty."

It was, without a doubt, the craziest thing Akio had ever heard in his life. She was quite literally asking Akio for his first born. That was a request he had never expected to be made of him in his lifetime. But,

he'd be lying if parts of it weren't appealing... If Ragyo could really make true on her promises, he could live forever with Ryuko. He'd have a place of power with Ragyo. His life would be saved, and the continuation of his bloodline assured. And he'd get to enact his punishment on Satsuki.

Akio closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"You're insane," Akio stated calmly when he opened them. "I'd take my own life before I gave you the life of my unborn child, let alone join up with you. And to think you tried to entice me by offering me the life of your daughter... disgusting."

Ragyo raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"And the future is *not* written," Akio continued firmly, raising a hand and closing it into a fist in front of him. "I will make sure of that with *my own two hands* . With Ryuko on by *my* side, not yours."

"Hmmm," Ragyo hummed and snapped her fingers. "It seems that you still need to be tamed."

"Tamed?" Akio repeated and narrowed his eyes, his gaze moving to Nui as she walked into the cage with them.

Nui smiled sweetly at him and reached into the top of her pink dress, pulling out a barbed whip.

Akio's eyes widened, but before he could react Ragyo spoke once more.

"Break him in, would you my sweet?"

Nui giggled and raised her arm, the tip of the whip cracking as she swung at Akio.

Day 20

Akio stared vacantly into space, his eyes unblinking and emotionless. His head wasn't muddy or clear; it was just empty. No thoughts struck him, nor any feelings. The skin on his arms and back had long been flayed by the barbed whip of Nui, then cleaned so they wouldn't become infected. Rinse and repeat.

Her, Ragyo, and Rei came in daily now, asking him the same question.

"Your answer?"

And Akio always gave the same reply.

"Never."

After the third day, they didn't even bother taking him out of the cell to do it. They just whipped him in front of Satsuki.

He screamed during the first one. Whimpered after the third one. Now, he was silent.

They didn't bother to chain him back up, either. It wasn't like he was able to go anywhere. His limbs might have had the strength to stand up and limp away, but his mind certainly didn't.

"Takahiro."

Satsuki tried once more to speak to him, but Akio remained silent. He just didn't have the mental energy to respond anymore. He just wanted to sit and stare off into the darkness. It was more enticing to him.

"Takahiro, answer me."

She tried once more.

And he remained silent once more.

His vacant, lifeless stare didn't change.

Day 25

Akiko sat in her shared room with Nonon, sitting crisscross on her bed with her attention taken up by some picture book that she had been able to find for Akiko. It was... okay. It was about a hungry caterpillar, which Akiko found no enjoyment in. She'd rather it be about knights and their princesses, kings and their queens. Not this weird, green caterpillar that couldn't stop eating things.

Nonon herself was snoozing in her bed, the blankets hugged to her shoulders as she slumbered away. It was still early, at least no later than eight in the morning, but Akiko had always been an early riser. It was just one of her traits.

Looking over at Nonon, however... well, Akiko knew that the pink haired girl wasn't that much of a morning person. After staying with her for the last two weeks, Akiko had come to learn a lot about the pink haired girl. Mr. Mikisugi said that she would only be staying here until Akio returned, but Akiko knew that in actuality Nonon had been recruited to be her babysitter. She wasn't that stupid, even if she was just five years old.

Akiko flipped to the last page of the book, letting out a disgruntled sigh. Now she had nothing.

Tossing the book on the ground, Akiko brought her knees up to her chest, letting her chin rest on them.

She wished she had someone else to talk to. She considered going to find Mataro and the rest of his family, but Mr. Mikisugi made a good point when he said they'd be super busy with a bunch of patients. A lot of people were sick and injured.

Nonon wasn't very fun to talk to. Akiko could just never get a read on her. In some moments she was quite sweet, but in others she was quite rude and thoughtless of other's feelings. In Akiko's terms, she was a big meanie.

Akiko sighed once more, the makings of tears beginning to flood her eyes. She wished she could see her parents. She missed them so much... Akio told her that he'd bring them back soon, but what did that even mean? Where were they even? All she knew was that those scary looking business suits took them away.

Burying her face into her knees, silent sobs racked her small body. She wished that Akio was here. If he was here with her, then maybe everything wouldn't be so scary.

Where was he right now? Was he okay? She certainly hoped so. She had a lot planned to do with her big brother. Like showing him her favorite cartoons, her favorite stories, her favorite toys. He hadn't even seen her favorite dress yet!

The sounds of Nonon yawning and rising from her creaky bed broke her from her thoughts.

Akiko raised her head and looked to the still half-asleep Nonon.

"Morning," Nonon grumbled, rubbing her eyes sleepily with her wrists. Yep. Definitely not a morning person.

"Good morning," Akiko whispered, turning her gaze to the floor and wiping the tears from her eyes.

Nonon followed her eyes to the ground, eventually spotting the discarded book.

"What, did you not like that one?" Nonon asked as she rose from her bed, walking over to the book and picking it up.

"Not really," Akiko answered.

"Huh," Nonon remarked, flipping open the book. "Weird. My mother always used to read this to me when I was a kid."

"What's weird about not liking it?" Akiko asked quietly.

"Hmmm?" Nonon hummed and looked up from the book. "Oh, nothing. Just wasn't expecting the No Star's sister to have such picky taste when it came to children's books."

"You aren't very nice, Miss Jakuzure," Akiko glowered at her.

"So I've been told, countless times," Nonon sighed and tossed the book back on the floor. "And please, call me Nonon."

"Why do you keep calling my brother No Star, Nonon?" Akiko asked the question that had been bugging her for the past two weeks.

"It's short for No Star tra-" Nonon stopped herself when she realized who she was talking to. "No reason. Just a nickname."

Akiko frowned, not easily fooled despite her age, but she decided to let it slip.

"Are you close with my brother?"

"Not really," Nonon replied and leaned back on her hands, her voice dropping to a soft whisper. "He's a bit of a self-entitled dick."

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Nonon shook her head. "But yeah, I guess you could say we had a few run-ins."

Which wasn't technically a lie.

Akiko nodded, her eyes lost in thought. Run-ins?

"Like dates?" She asked hopefully.

"What?!" Nonon exclaimed. "How did you get *that* from run-ins?!"

"I don't know," Akiko shrugged, then raised her hand to point at Nonon. "But your cheeks are red."

Nonon slapped her cheeks, cursing her body for painting her in such a bad light in this moment of time.

"S-shut up! They are not!" Nonon cried before she realized she was yelling at a five year old. "Ahem. What I meant to say, was that that is more Matoi's department, not mine."

"Matoi?" Akiko asked, raising an eyebrow. "Who's that?"

"Ryuko Matoi, his girlfriend, or from what I've been told," Nonon replied. For a brief moment terror flashed across her face, but she quickly reeled herself back in. She had just realized that she was gossiping with a five year old. Gossiping. With a five year old. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

"Really?" Akiko's eyes brightened. "Where is she? Is she here on the ship?"

"No," Nonon frowned. "No, she isn't."

Nonon rose from her bed and stretched towards the ceiling, resulting in a very satisfying popping noise coming from her spine.

"Here," Nonon began walking to the door, motioning Akiko to do the same. "Why don't we go get some breakfast and I'll introduce you to the rest of the bozos I hang out with now that we have some time to kill."

Akiko thought on it for a second before shrugging and hopping off the bed to follow Nonon out the door.

She was curious as to why she changed the subject so quickly though.

Day 30

Satsuki exhaled slowly, her eyes trained on Takahiro as her toes scraped against the pavement beneath her. Great progress had been made on the sharpening of her false nails. They were no doubt sharp enough to escape, but she'd need to wait for the right opportunity. The only problem was a certain cellmate. How she'd escape with him in this state, well, she was just unsure.

They hadn't come the past two days. Even if they did, she doubted he would notice it anymore. His expression hadn't changed in days. As far as looks goes, it looked like his will was broken. The only thing he did nowadays was eat, drink, sleep, and breathe. Otherwise he was a ghost of a man. His thousand yard stare hadn't changed in days. In the first few weeks, he had made sure to remind her of her failures, each and every one of them. But now, he was just quiet. Unnervingly so.

But she knew he wasn't done. He wasn't that weak of a man. If he was finished, he wouldn't tell them 'no' every time they asked him for his answer. To what answer that was for, she had no clue, but it was clear that it was something important, otherwise they wouldn't put so much effort into getting him to say yes. They would've just killed him already.

And if she was wrong, and his will really was broken... well... She had no need for half-baked allies or weaklings.

Satsuki sighed softly, her cold expression softening slightly.

Maybe Takahiro's impression of her was right. If that's the way she thought about people who needed help, maybe there was something wrong with her. And yet, it was the way she needed to be if she wanted to prove victorious against her mother. It was unfortunate, but it was the way things had to be. These were the cards she was given, and she wasn't going to fold. She was going to win, no matter the hand.

But that didn't mean she couldn't feel guilty. It was because of her and her family that Takahiro was locked up in this place and that he

had to endure this torment. She had personally watched him take each of those whippings from Nui.

It was because of her and her family that lives were being threatened. That lives might already be lost. Maybe it wasn't her fault directly, but she played a large part in it, and will still play a large part in it.

A part of her understood Takahiro's resentment towards her. If it was one of her Elite Four that had been captured by the COVERS, she'd be just as angry as he was, and would be looking for someone to blame. She'd never understand what he felt about losing his family, though. Family was something that she had never had, and if Ragyo were to suddenly die, she'd be overjoyed, not sad.

"Takahiro."

He didn't respond.

"Akio," She tried once more.

Still nothing.

"... I'm sorry."

Takahiro's eyebrows twitched, his eyes slowly moving to where she was hanging. It was as if someone had just woken him from some hypnotized state by snapping their fingers in front of his face.

"I do not deny my role in all of this," Satsuki continued, meeting his green eyes. "And for that I am deeply sorry. I promise you, when we get out of here, I will personally help you look for Mankanshoku and your parents."

Takahiro swallowed and blinked a few times, his lower lip beginning to tremble.

"I am so sorry," She repeated truthfully and bowed her head to him. "I ask for your forgiveness."

Akio let his head rest against the steel bars behind him as he closed his eyes, his chest rising and falling rapidly. A few stray tears broke down his cheeks, pushing through the grime and dirt that covered his skin.

Satsuki watched him closely, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of his tears. It looked as if he planned on saying something, be it to curse her name or to accept the apology. It could go either way at this point, but either way it was better than nothing. Anything was better than the lifeless man he had been the past ten days.

"I-I was only just getting to know my parents," Akio said after a few moments of silence, his voice cracking. "A-and, and then they were just ripped away from me. I've never been there for my little sister, and I only wanted to have that chance, with Mom and Dad still around. She's so young... she doesn't deserve to lose her parents at this age."

Akio squirmed against the bars behind him, tears freely flowing from his eyes.

"A-and Mako... she was the nicest person I've ever known," Akio continued and opened his eyes. "The first day I met her, do you know what she did to me?"

Satsuki shook her head. She was hanging on each of his words, her ears straining to hear them. She had expected him to curse at her, or even less likely, accept her apology. She hadn't expected this tangent he was taking, however.

"She invited me to dinner. To dinner! I hadn't even said a word to her, and she invited me to dinner with her family."

Akio bit his lip, but a soft sob escaped from his lips regardless.

"Do you know what I said to her?"

Satsuki shook her head again.

"... I said no."

"Why's that?"

"Because I thought being a stupid fucking undercover agent was more important!" He choked out, slamming his fist into the ground. His bones creaked at the sudden movement, but he ignored it. "I only started going over there because I thought it could be a suitable place for Ryuko to stay. That's the only reason! I sat beside her for a fucking year and that's the only reason I ever went over there! For my own goddamned selfish reasons!"

Akio began to cry fully, his screams of anguish echoing in the dark, going unheard by Satsuki and Satsuki alone. He cared not about what he looked like or who he was confessing to, as it was too late to try and stop it now. All of the pent up anger, guilt, sadness, hatred, pain, and every other emotion he had felt in the past month began to course through him, all thanks to the three simple words uttered by Satsuki.

Satsuki continued to watch him closely, something akin to curiosity in her eyes.

"I turned her down time and time again, but she never stopped inviting me. She'd just keep asking as if I had never said no, giving me that same friendly smile and that same damned pat on the head," Akio sobbed. "I've never regretted something so much in my life. If I could go back, I'd say yes every time."

Akio buried his face in his hands, his fingers gripping at his hair as if to pull it out, his cries only growing louder.

"No matter how rude or callous I was, she always treated me as if I were one of her family. She loved me unconditionally, even if I didn't return it. And how did I repay that kindness?"

Satsuki remained silent, already knowing where this was going.

"By letting her fucking die!" He shouted and slammed his back into the bars, no doubt causing himself immense pain. That was probably his intention. "It was all *MY FAULT* !"

He slammed his back into the rough steel bars once more, the pain not even registering to him anymore.

"She isn't dead, Akio," Satsuki reminded him quietly. "We can still save her, your family, and everyone else."

"... Y-you mean that?"

"I do."

Akio took several shaky breaths, his body trembling due to a mixture of pain and sorrow. He eventually got a hold of himself, but he was still glowering, and a few stray tears still fell from his eyes.

"This world isn't fair," Akio declared after a few moments of silence, his eyes meeting hers. "How old are you, Satsuki?"

"Eighteen."

"Same age as I am," Akio nodded and turned his head to the ground. " And Ryuko and Mako are seventeen."

Satsuki rose an eyebrow at him, unsure of where he was going with this. What would their ages have to do anything? Other than the fact that their bodies and minds were still maturing, and their increased tolerance to Life Fibers, she couldn't think of anything else. Was this how he normally had conversations?

"We're still just children and look at us," Akio spat bitterly. "Chained and locked up. Battered and bruised. Broken and ruined. We've experienced things that no man or woman should, and we still aren't even half-way finished yet. Everyone still expects the world of us."

Satsuki narrowed her eyes at him. She had never taken Akio to be the self-pitying type, or even the pitying type for that matter.

"The past is the past. These are things we cannot change, Akio. It is only the-"

"-Roles we were given, yeah, I've said that to myself about a thousand times now," Akio scoffed, letting out a tiny snuffle. "That doesn't change the fact that I feel sorrow for Ryuko or Mako. Or even for you."

Akio turned his head to Satsuki.

"Do you ever feel pity for others, Satsuki?"

"It is a natural human emotion," Satsuki answered plainly. "But why pity them when you could take action to help them?"

"That's a very 'Satsuki' answer, Lady Satsuki," Akio snorted.

"You need not say it with such sarcasm, Takahiro."

Akio smiled slightly, the first time that Satsuki had seen such an emotion on his face for what felt like months.

Emotionally and physically drained, he leaned back against the bars, immediately wincing and grasping at one of his arms.

Satsuki's expression darkened, her eyes looking him up and down. Off in the distance, she could faintly hear the sounds of battle. It seemed that Akio couldn't hear it himself.

The timing couldn't be better.

"How's the pain?" She asked, her eyes traveling to the single window the room had.

"Bearable," Akio mumbled. "They have me on so many drugs at this point that I can hardly feel much of anything."

"Think you can run?"

"I doubt it. I might be able to walk, but I don't have the coordination to run," Akio replied, turning his head to Satsuki. "Why?"

The question was answered for him when an explosion off in the distance rattled the foundations of the room.

Akio's eyes widened, and for the first time in weeks hope sparkled in them.

"No way..."

"Our ride seems to be the rowdy type."

Raising her hips, Satsuki brought her leg up, using her false toenail to cut the chain that held her in place. She almost had to bite her cheek to keep herself from letting out a whimper as her feet touched the ground and her arms finally fell to her sides. After a month of being hung up like that, actually being able to move her arms and rotate her shoulders felt amazing, if not slightly painful.

Akio continued to look at the window in bewilderment, as if this whole chain of events was too good to be true.

Satsuki popped her neck and rotated her shoulder blades, then turned her head over to Akio.

"We're leaving this place. I hope you don't mind being carried."

Author's Notes:

And there you have it!

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. I definitely had fun writing it.

And yes, as you probably have noticed, I did not do a Ryuko POV. For two reasons. One: I wanted to give screen time to some characters that I haven't had a chance to write before.

Like Nonon, Satsuki, Akiko, and Mataro. Two: Well, it'd be the exact same as the anime. It'd be her brooding and "losing her way." Not much deviation from the show, other than some fleeting thoughts of good old Akio.

I hope you didn't mind too much, and if you did, well, don't you worry! Next chapter will have a whole lot of Ryuko! Lots and lots of Ryuko! She's just losing her way all over the damn place. Might as well blast Before My Body is Dry during the next chapter. It'd only seem fitting given the name of the story, no?

Oh, god. I can't wait for next chapter. I truly can't.

Anyhow, thanks for reading everyone! Until next time!

Strength of Heart

Author's Notes:

Hey guys! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

We've got a big one on our hands, and it's only the first of two that will cover this episode in the anime.

I really wanted to fit the whole thing into one chapter, but this one was already pushing 12,000, and in my opinion it reads a lot better if I finish the Junketsu Ryuko part next chapter. The flow is much better.

Needless to say, these two chapters will cover one of my favorite parts in the show: Ryuko wearing Junketsu. Honestly, I could probably write this scene into three chapters or more, but I won't do that to you. I want to get to the juicy parts I have planned just as much as you all do. So, I hope you all don't mind a really long chapter for the third time in a row!

So read, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

Satsuki bolted down the hallway, jumping and hopping all around as she cut through any COVER that had the misfortune of getting in her way. It was impressive, really. Her strength, flexibility, and precision in dealing with these fiendish suits was a thing of beauty. Even more, it was a feat of freakish strength. She was able to do all of this with an eighteen year old boy on her back.

While her skills impressed Akio, he was also slightly taken back at the entire thing. They were both wearing nothing... and he was straddling her back piggyback style as they ran through the halls... in

the nude... Needless to say, he was very thankful for her long hair in this moment. It provided a nice cushion to separate some of the, err, more indecent areas, so to speak.

Satsuki tore through a few more COVERS and rounded a corner.

"How are you doing all of this with just a toenail?" Akio finally asked the question that had been killing him on the inside.

"It's a false toenail made of the same material as Bakuzan," Satsuki grunted as she took another down. "It is more than enough for scraps of cloth like this."

Akio had to admit, he was even more impressed now. How did she think this one up? Her intelligence and foresight were incredible, even if he had been cursing her name on those exact things only a few weeks ago.

Turning his head to the windows they were running past, Akio examined the outside battle. Thousands of COVERS littered the sky, floating aimlessly as the real battle happened down below.

"No..." Akio muttered, his eyes widening at the sight of a familiar head of black hair in the courtyard, fighting another familiar head of blonde hair.

"And soon, she'll be where she belongs."

"No, no, no," Akio continued, his eyes narrowing. That... it couldn't be. There's no way Ryuko would join Ragyo. There was just no way! It was so ridiculous that it made Akio feel even stupider for thinking it. Ragyo and Ryuko? Please, it wasn't even a question. She hated Ragyo just as much as he did. She'd never choose to join her. That was crazy thinking. She was probably here to save the two of them.

And yet...

"Satsuki, Ryuko is out there. What should we do?"

"Matoi?" Satsuki said and glanced out the window at the fight below. "She can handle herself. We, however, are useless right now."

"Right," Akio nodded. That made sense. It was pure logic, really. Satsuki might be able to take on several of them, but Akio was just deadweight. He could hardly run, let alone throw a punch. His limbs felt like jello, at this point. If he had a weapon of some sorts, like a gun, he might be able to provide assistance. But that assistance would require him to be sitting down, and the target to be stationary. So in other words, he was still pretty much useless. And in this state, he'd only weigh someone else down.

His thoughts were interrupted when a flash of blue light exploded through the windows, nearly blinding him.

"Ngh!"

Akio raised an arm to block the light and turned his head away, but no matter what he did the light still reached his eyes.

Satsuki continued undisturbed, but something must have caught her eye down below as she began to slow down as she reached another corner, eventually coming to a full stop.

"Satsuki?" Akio asked, his arm still covering his eyes. Damn, why was it so incredibly bright? It was like the sun was right outside or something. And why wasn't Satsuki as blinded as he was?

He could hear Satsuki's teeth grind in her mouth, but she remained silent. After a pregnant pause, she began to run again, quicker this time, while not answering Akio's inquiry. Now he was beginning to worry. There were only three people out there, and Satsuki wouldn't react this strongly if something bad had happened to Ragyo or Nui. Hell, she'd probably even let out a cry of victory.

"Satsuki?"

"You should not look, unless you're ready to see what lies ahead," Satsuki replied, her bare feet slapping against the floor as she continued to run, undeterred by whatever she had seen.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Finally lowering his arm, content to let the rays of blue light blind him as long as he could get a look at what was going on below, Akio turned his head to the window.

"What...?"

The blue light was emanating from Ryuko, who was hanging in the air due to what looked to be hundreds of red Life Fibers that were dug into her skin and holding her in place. As she floated upwards, a familiar white and blue sailor suit began to move towards her. Before he could witness anything else, Satsuki rounded another corner and in the opposite direction of the scene in the courtyard.

Akio's confusion only grew, and slowly, it turned into fear.

"Satsuki, what is going on? That was Junketsu, was it not?"

"We need to get out of here, and quickly," Satsuki deflected, using one of her feet to kick open the door to the roof.

Akio squinted his eyes as he was assaulted by another wave of bright light, but in this case his eyes were able to adjust quickly to the bright sunlight.

He almost wished they hadn't.

The two were able to make it to the roof, with Akio on Satsuki's back, but it wasn't exactly the escape route they were hoping for. The roof was littered in COVERS, some of them floating, while some of them were on the ground, their bodies large and muscular.

"Tch! Cheap, mass-produced garbage!"

Satsuki took a deep breath and began to sprint forwards, fully ready to fight each and every suit in attendance.

However, that wasn't going to be the case.

Both of them turned their heads to the skies at the sound of a helicopter engine. There, high above them in the sky, was a Nudist Beach helicopter and a free falling Elite Four.

Explosions filled the sky as the helicopter let loose a salvo of missiles on the COVERS, the explosions outlining each of the three Elite Four members perfectly.

Gamagoori was the first to hit the ground, his gigantic body causing the roof to crack and shake. Next was Uzu, who cut Satsuki's shackles with his half of Bakuzan, and then Nonon, carrying two cloth towels.

"Lady Satsuki!" Uzu greeted, raising his blade to protect them.

"You'll catch a cold. Here, take this."

Nonon handed them both a towel to cover their exposed flesh, which Akio was more than thankful for. After being naked for an entire month, he was overjoyed at the prospect of clothing touching his skin once more, Life Fibers be damned.

The three crowed around the duo, using their bodies to protect them from the hundreds of surrounding COVERS, while conveniently hiding them as they wrapped the towels around their bodies.

Akio faltered slightly as he pulled the towel around himself, but Gamagoori's giant of a hand had reached around to grab him by the shoulder and keep him from falling over completely. Being jostled around on Satsuki's back while she ran and jumped around must have taken more out of him in then he thought. He was feeling extremely weak all of a sudden.

"Forgive us for taking so long to come for you two," Gamagoori apologized.

"No, the timing of the Elite Four is impeccable as always," Satsuki replied in earnest as she threw the towel around herself. "We must make haste and escape while we can. It will soon be unsafe, and Akio has wounds that need dressing."

"What about you, Lady Satsuki?" Nonon asked.

"I shall manage. Akio is in much worse condition than I."

As if to prove her point, Akio felt a sudden wave of nausea and dizziness wrack his brain. He fell on to one knee, his hand moving to his temple to gently massage it. His vision began to darken, and his body began to tremble. He felt cold. Incredibly so. What the hell happened to him all of a sudden?

Uzu grabbed him by the arm, but pulled away when he felt a warm liquid rub off on his hand.

"Jeez," Uzu muttered and looped Akio's arm around his shoulder, regardless of the blood. "What happened to you?"

"Crap, he's bleeding," Nonon sighed. "Of course he's bleeding. Couldn't wait till we got back, huh?"

"Wha?"

Akio brought a hand around to his torn up back, his eyes widening at the bloodied hand when he pulled it away.

"The escape must have reopened the wounds," Satsuki stated, the sounds of the helicopter blades fast approaching. "Let's get out of here and recuperate."

Akio felt Uzu begin to usher him towards the helicopter, but his gaze was elsewhere.

"What about Ryuko?" Akio mumbled as he stared off into the distance. "We can't just leave her behind."

"We most definitely could," Nonon grumbled in her usual smarmy tone.

Satsuki shot Nonon a look that quickly shut her up, then turned to Akio.

"We have to leave. We can deal with Matoi later."

"Why are you saying that?" Akio replied hotly, digging his heels into the ground. "Damn it, what's going on?! You're acting like you already know what's happening!"

"That's because she does," Uzu grunted and pulled Akio along. "Now come on."

"I can't just leave her here!" Akio protested, resisting Uzu even more, the helicopter fast approaching. "She wouldn't do that to me, so I can't do that to her!"

"Didn't she, though?" Uzu stopped and turned to him. "I don't see Matoi here with the rescue party, do you?"

"But... that's... that's not... -"

"Stop being such an idiot," Nonon growled and grabbed his other arm to force him fully into the helicopter. "There are other people dependent on you, and yet here you are, resisting getting your ass saved. Maybe we should have just left you behind if you were going to be so difficult."

... Other people...

Akio closed his eyes and admitted defeat, although confusion still plagued his mind. He just didn't understand what any of them were saying, but they clearly didn't have time to sit around and talk about it. And Nonon was right, of course. It wasn't exactly like he could just

die and leave behind the people he loved. He had some promises he intended on keeping, and to do that, he had to be alive for now.

With all of them now aboard the copter, the aircraft took to the skies, leaving Honnouji Academy fast behind.

It only took them ten minutes to make it to the Nudist Beach flagship, which was a sight Akio hadn't seen in a long, long time. The proud vessel cut through the bright blue seas, slowly making its way east and towards what Akio assumed was Osaka, where it had set sail from.

The flight itself was quiet, the only sound coming from the helicopter's spinning blades. Akio didn't ask any more questions, and the other four didn't speak. But despite the situation, Akio could tell that the spirits of the Elite Four were as high as they could be. Just by looking at them Akio could see that there had been a great weight lifted from their shoulders with Satsuki's rescue.

Akio himself was feeling slightly better after sitting down and catching his bearings. He felt that he might pass out back at the Academy, but with some fresh air and a somewhat comfortable seat, his mind was slowly coming back to him. His body, on the other hand, was running dry. His limbs ached, his muscles were sore, and his gashes stung. His broken bones didn't hurt him much, but they were still mending. If he wasn't careful, he might just undue that healing.

"So this is the Nudist Beach flagship," Satsuki remarked as the helicopter came in for a landing.

"That's correct," Akio nodded. "The Takarada fortune did come from the shipbuilding industry, after all. We lucked out with them being our sponsors."

The helicopter landed on the ship's runway, and Gamagoori and Satsuki stepped off while Nonon and Uzu stayed back to help Akio.

Akio waved them both off, more than a little determined to make his own way off the aircraft and to the deck of the ship.

"Wait."

Akio stopped his slow limp to the front of the vessel, turning his head and raising an eyebrow at Nonon.

"Here," She said and passed him another towel. "You probably want to make sure you're fully covered before heading up."

Akio tilted his head to the side, cautiously accepting the towel and wrapping it around his body.

"AKIO!"

His eyes widening, Akio turned on his heel, his gaze immediately falling on to the little five year old racing towards him.

"Akiko!"

Despite his injuries, Akio met her halfway, already bending down to wrap her up into a bear hug.

Akiko slammed into his chest, wrapping her thin arms around his torso and burying her head into the towels that were wrapped around his body. She let out a few tearful giggles as her arms tightened around her brother.

Akio grimaced, but ignored the pain in his chest and picked her sister up off the ground, twirling her around in a circle. Nothing could bring him down in this moment. Injuries be damned.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!" Akio laughed, his grip tightening around her.

Akiko's giggles grew louder, her legs kicking the air as Akio twirled her around. But all good things must come to an end, as Akio began to feel his strength wane at the exertion. Slowing down, Akio placed

her back down on the ground, but knelt down in front of her, letting his hands rest on her shoulders.

"God, have I missed you," Akio smiled.

"Where have you been?" Akiko sniffled and rubbed her eyes that were threatening to break into tears. "Without Mom and Dad around, I was starting to get scared..."

"I'm so sorry princess," He frowned. "I, uh, I was just..."

Akio paled, his throat going dry. How could he answer that? It's not like he could be completely honest about his whereabouts the past month. That wasn't exactly a story you'd tell your five year old sister.

"He was out kicking some bad guy butt," A familiar snarky voice answered for him.

Akio glanced over at Nonon, who had stopped beside him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Really?" Akiko squeaked, looking back and forth between Nonon and Akio.

"Y-yes," Akio nodded.

"Oh, I knew it! No one could get the upper hand on my big brother," Akiko giggled and smiled at Nonon. "Thanks for going and getting him, Miss Nonon."

"Don't mention it," Nonon waved her off, her voice dropping to a whisper. "It wasn't like he made it easy for us..."

Akio rose an eyebrow, looking back and forth between his sister and the Elite Four member.

"How do *you* know my sister?"

"Miss Nonon was the one to save Mataro and me," Akiko answered for him.

Akio's eyes widened, his jaw dropping. Rising to his full height, he faced Nonon fully.

"Is this true?"

Nonon shrugged, looking rather bored with the conversation.

Akio blinked at her. Nonon? It was Nonon Jakuzure who had saved his sister. Nonon. Jakuzure. Of all of the Elite Four members, he would expect it to be Uzu or Gamagoori, but not the musician. He was always under the impression that Nonon hated his guts. Yet, here she was, helping his family.

"Thank you, Nonon Jakuzure," Akio said and pulled her into an unexpected hug. "You are forever in my debt."

Nonon blinked a few times, her body unmoving at the unexpected reaction. It wasn't everyday she got hugs.

"H-hey!" Nonon recovered herself and pushed him away. Dusting herself off, she glared daggers at him. "A simple thank you would have been just fine!"

"Akio!"

Akio turned his head at his next greeter and away from Nonon, giving her the perfect chance to sneak away.

"Dumb, No Star trash," Nonon grumbled to herself as she stomped away. "I better not have any blood on me."

"Aikuro!" Akio smiled, grabbing on to Akiko's hand and meeting his brother half way. It was kind of funny, really. Just seeing all of these people again, and thinking about the goodwill of what he once thought were his enemies had rejuvenated him.

Aikuro returned the smile, wrapping his brother in a hug and letting out a laugh of pure joy.

"You crazy son of a bitch," He whispered into his ear. "You nearly gave me a heart attack! What the hell were you thinking?"

"Sorry, brother," Akio whispered back, although he wasn't one hundred percent sure if he meant it. There wasn't really much more he could say on the matter. What he had done was dumb, and downright dangerous, but it had to be done. Even if it was stupid.

"Well, at least you're back now," Aikuro spoke up and broke away from the hug. "How're you feeling, by the way? Is everything alright? Are you injured? No broken bones or anything?"

Akio smiled warmly at his brother's care for him, but shook his head.

"I have a few scrapes I might need looked at, but I'll live," He lied, his eyes deliberately moving back and forth between Akiko to Aikuro.

Aikuro caught on to what he was doing and nodded.

"Fair enough. We'll get you to Bazaro right away."

Akio's eyes widened.

"B-bazaro?"

"Yeah," Aikuro grinned. "Him and the rest of the Mankanshokus are down below in the infirmary."

"The rest of the Mankanshokus?"

Akio swallowed the lump in his throat.

"E-even... even..."

"Yes," Aikuro nodded. "And she'd probably be delighted to see you. You remember where it is, right? You better hurry, though. I'm told

we don't have much time."

"Right," Akio replied, his hand tightening around Akiko's. "Let's go, princess."

Like he was going to let her out of her sight. When he started to get treatment for his wounds, he'd just have Mataro take her out into the hall or something. But not a moment too soon. He was going to enjoy this time he had with her, however short it might be. For all he knew, today could be the last day he had. If it was, there was absolutely no way he was going to leave it with any regrets. He was going to spend as much time with her as he could.

The walk to the infirmary wasn't too far. Taking a trip down a flight of stairs, and then around a few corners of the ship, Akio and Akiko found themselves in the hallway of the sickbay.

Akio paused outside the door to the infirmary, his hand hovering over the door handle. He was so excited to see them all again... but a bigger part of himself was nervous and afraid. It was stupid, but it was the truth. What if they were all mad at him for letting them down? It was because of him that Mako was sucked up in the first place. What if they hated him for that? What if she did? If Mako hated him, he didn't know what he would do.

He resolved to be a better friend to her. And to do that, he had to put his hand on that door and walk in. It was simple!

"Is everything alright, Akio?" Akiko asked, looking up to him.

"Of course," Akio exhaled. *Do it. Do it, do it, do it.*

Placing his hand on the handle, he turned it and walked in.

The infirmary was the same Akio had remembered it, although he had only been here a few times. The room was made from the steel hull of the ship, and looked as such. There were a few beds in the side opposite to him, while a desk, a closet that had all of the

medical supplies, and some chairs were all located at the other side of the room.

Mataro was laying on one of the beds with his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling as he whistled some tune. Mrs. and Mrs. Mankanshoku were sitting in some of the chairs, Mr. Mankanshoku sleeping while his wife read from a book.

Mrs. Mankanshoku was the first to look up, her eyes widening at the sight of their once lost family friend.

"Akio!" Mrs. Mankanshoku exclaimed as she jumped from her seat, striding over to Akio and wrapping him in a hug. "We were worried sick about you!"

Akiko giggled and took a step back, giving her brother some room.

"Boss!"

Mataro hopped up from the bed, crossing the room in a few strides and joining her mother in on the hug.

Mr. Mankanshoku was the next to approach him, resting a hand on his shoulder and giving it a soft squeeze.

"Good to see you again, champ. When Mataro told us what happened, we were all pretty worried about you."

Akio blinked a few times, but quickly recovered from his initial shock and returned the hug. Of course his worries for naught. Like the Mankanshokus had one resentful bone in their bodies.

"It's good to see you all too," Akio replied softly, closing his eyes and tightening his arms around them. "I... I'm sorry. About everything. If I just-"

Mrs. Mankanshoku broke from the hug and shushed him with a smile on her face.

"Just nothing, dear. You have nothing to worry about, okay? Everything's fine, and everyone's safe. So don't beat yourself up over it."

Akio returned the smile and nodded. The kindness that these people showed him was just incredible. Sometimes, he didn't know if he ever deserved it in the first place, with the way he had treated them and used them.

But that reminded him. A certain, sprightly member of the family was missing.

"Where's Mako, by the way?"

"Sis went to the bathroom, but she should be-"

As if on cue, the sounds of fast approaching footsteps echoed from down the hallway.

Akio turned his head to see who the newcomer was, but before he could, someone barreled into his chest, nearly knocking both him and the would-be attacker to the floor.

"Akio!" Mako laughed into his chest, rubbing her cheek against the white towel. "When I saw that familiar tuft of brown hair, I just knew it was you! Knew it, knew it, knew it! Ah, it's so good to see you!"

He almost couldn't believe what he was seeing. Here was the girl that had slipped through his finger tips a month before. Here was Mako Mankanshoku, the girl who he thought had died. Hugging him and pressing her cheek against his chest, was the first friend he had ever made. The first person to ever show him kindness at Honnouji Academy. The first person to ever invite him to dinner. One of two people he had ever had a 'slumber party' with.

And she was alive and in his arms.

In that moment, every fear of Akio's washed away, replaced with an immense feeling of relief and happiness. Mako would never be mad at him. Never. It was foolish to think that she would be in the first place.

Returning the hug as if his life depended on it, Akio closed his eyes as he fought back tears.

The rest of the Mankanshokus took a step back, all watching the moment between the two friends fondly.

"I-I'm so sorry, M-Mako," Akio stammered into her hair, his arms beginning to tremble slightly. "I-I-I-I-"

Mako broke away from the hug to smile warmly at him.

"Why are you sorry?"

Reaching a hand up, Mako patted Akio on the head.

"You haven't done anything to be sorry about, silly."

That did it.

Akio wrapped Mako in a giant hug, one that he had no intention of breaking anytime soon. As silent sobs racked his body, he cradled Mako's head with one hand and her back with the other, as if both were precious chinaware.

Mako smiled at her friend, giving Akio a several pats on the back as she whispered words of comfort to him.

"It's okay, Akio, it's okay," Mako cooed to him as if he were a hurt child.

"I-I-I'm s-so sorry," Akio repeated over and over again. In those three words, he apologized for everything he had ever done to her. Every time he denied her friendship, every time he had unconsciously put her in danger, everything.

"It's okay," Mako answered back every time.

"Goodness gracious," Mr. Mankanshoku sighed as he inspected Akio's bare body. "I'll give it to you straight, son. This is bad. Real bad."

Akio winced and turned his head away. He had a feeling that was the case.

He was currently sitting on one of the infirmary beds in the nude, the only thing covering his privates was the towel that Nonon had given him earlier. Looking down at his mangled body, he couldn't say he disagreed with the back-alley doctor. The gashes from his fight with Ragyo had healed for the most part, leaving only giant red scars that marred his skin. The doctor said those were fine. His broken bones and the wounds from the barbed whip, on the other hand...

The broken bones had been set, but they weren't being properly supported. If he had gone on much longer, especially in the conditions that he was living in, his broken bones would have been in serious danger of misaligning. If that had been the case, they'd have to be broken again so they could be set properly. Thankfully, that wasn't the case, and the doctor had been able to wrap bandages tightly around his ribs to keep those in place, and was going to get a cast to put on his broken arm. The collarbone was an easy fix, as he only needed to keep his soon-to-be casted arm in a sling. He just had to be careful about his movements.

The wounds from the barbed whip were in danger of getting infected, if they hadn't already. Even though they had been cleaned by his captors, they were constantly being reopened and weren't given the time to scab over fully. In the dirty cell he was living in, that wasn't good.

Akio did his best to avoid looking at some of the more deeper cuts, afraid of what he might see. Nui had been relentless with her torment of him.

Mako and Mrs. Mankanshoku were watching on worriedly as Bazarō examined him. As per Akio's request, Matarō had taken Akiko to go get something to eat, leaving him alone with the rest of the Mankanshokus to get his wounds stitched up.

Akio hadn't noticed him before, but Senketsu was in the room as well, leaning up against the wall in the corner of the room, which is probably why he didn't notice him in the first place. Now that he had, however, he noted that Senketsu's eye was always following him. It comforted Akio. It was like Senketsu was keeping a silent vigil over him, ready to protect him with his life if the situation called for it.

"These are all going to need stitches," Mr. Mankanshoku commented, examining each of his wounds. "It looks an awful lot like..."

Mr. Mankanshoku looked up from Akio's wounds, his expression deathly serious.

"These wounds look they were caused by a whip, Akio."

Akio turned away, not answering.

Mako and her mother gasped. He could almost feel their pitying gazes from here...

"I see," Mr. Mankanshoku hummed softly, going back to examining his body. "They cleaned 'em, but with wounds like these you have to do more. Stuff like ointments to make sure the skin doesn't get too agitated or dry out. And you say they gave you medications?"

"Yeah," Akio nodded. "They told me it was painkillers and antibiotics, but nothing specific."

"How much did they give you?"

"Two syringes three times a day."

"Straight syringes? No IVs?"

Akio nodded again.

"I'm surprised your liver and kidneys aren't shot then," Mr. Mankanshoku remarked. "I doubt they thought about what would happen if the drugs had some cross-reactions. And if they didn't change the needles... well, that'd be quite bad."

Akio paled, worry beginning to gnaw at his chest. He knew it was bad, but he didn't know it was *this* bad.

Mr. Mankanshoku took a step back, his hand slowly rubbing his temple.

"I'll be honest, Akio. You're lucky to be alive right now," Mr. Mankanshoku stated. "Even I know not to do half the stuff these so called *doctors* did to ya."

"A-am I going to be okay?"

"Yes," He nodded. "But we're going to have to seriously get on this, starting now. We'll have to stitch all of the wounds, make sure the drugs you were given didn't cause any harm, and make sure you don't injure your fractured bones. I'm giving you bed rest for at least a week, and then we'll take it from there."

"A week?!" Akio exclaimed, already preparing to make a strong rebuttal when he caught the stare Mako was giving him. It was filled with a sad hope. As if she wanted him to take the bed rest, but she knew he wouldn't.

Akio sighed and bit his lip, only giving the doctor a small nod. He couldn't do that to her.

"Good. We'll get started-"

BOOM!

An explosion shook the entire ship, nearly causing everyone to fall from their seats.

"What the hell was that?!" Akio shouted and stood up.

"I-I don't know," Mako answered. "Let's go check!"

The Mankanshokus and Senketsu all climbed up onto Akio's bed, poking their heads out the window. Not one to be left out, Akio followed suit to get a better look at what was happening on the deck.

His heart stopped beating.

His breath caught in his throat.

His blood ran cold.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!" Ryuko laughed maniacally, her words sending shivers down Akio's spine. Except that... that voice wasn't Ryuko.

Ryuko stood laughing in the center of the ruined ship, wearing what Akio could only assume to be Junketsu given the design. Except that it looked nothing like the previous times he had seen it activated. It almost looked like a dress now, with Junketsu's eyes on the spikes on Ryuko's shoulders. Two, what Akio could only describe as horns, curved up from her black hair, which had now become more spikey and poofed out with a patch of blue in the back.

The most damning part about her however was her face. The wrinkles in her skin that hadn't been there before made her look crazed, insane even. Her smile wasn't the one he had grown used to. Now it looked wicked and evil. Her blue eyes that Akio had always found beautiful were not such anymore. They were sinister, and filled with bloodlust. The red bags that circled them only added on to that effect. The eyes, coupled with the horns on her head and the fangs in her mouth, gave her the look of a demon. Nothing like the seventeen year old girl he once knew.

This wasn't Ryuko. This wasn't the fiery and hotheaded girl he met that fateful day so many months ago. This wasn't the girl he fell in

love with. No, it was a monster. A shell of her former self.

And it tore him apart to look at her. The love he felt for her was slowly being overshadowed by fear.

"Wait, how come Ryuko is wearing Junketsu?!" Mako shouted.

Akio slowly turned his head back to glance Senketsu. Just from the look in his eye, he could tell that he was feeling the same feelings that Akio was.

A knock came from the infirmary door.

"I'm coming in," A familiar voice spoke.

Akio tore his eyes away from Ryuko and to the door, his mouth gaping at who had walked in.

"Lady Satsuki?" Mako uttered.

"What's going on Satsuki?" Akio asked as he took a step off the bed and towards her. "Why is Ryuko like that?"

Satsuki's eyes met his briefly, then moved to Senketsu.

"You know why I am here, Senketsu," She spoke plainly.

Akio's face fell, his head slowly turning to Senketsu, whose single eye was locked on to Satsuki's.

"Shut up!" Akio shouted and pushed Satsuki's back to the wall, his other hand pointing a finger in her face. "You *will* tell me what's going on, damn it! I'm tired of you ignoring me!"

Satsuki's stern blue eyes met his, unwavering and unrelenting. If Akio wasn't going through an internal crisis at the moment, he might have backed down from the look alone.

"Matoi has become a slave to the Life Fibers. As long as she's worn by Junketsu, her mind, self, and soul are lost."

"No..."

Akio slowly took a step back from Satsuki, placing a hand over his mouth to keep the bile in his throat. It was what he had feared. Anyone that got a good look at her could tell that much, even Guts. He just needed to hear Satsuki to say it.

"Mankanshoku," Satsuki addressed her and walked past Akio. "I have need of you."

"Of course, Lady Satsuki!" Mako stepped towards her and fell into a salute.

Reaching out and grabbing her hand, Satsuki pulled out a marker and began to write on her skin.

"When I confront Matoi, I need you to relay this to my Elite Four," Satsuki explained as she wrote.

"You can count on me," Mako nodded enthusiastically.

"Good," Satsuki replied. "Because this is of the utmost importance. If we fail here, we fail the rest of the world."

Was this really happening? Was Ryuko really their enemy now?

Akio turned his head to look back at Mako and Satsuki. Satsuki was ready to risk her own life to stop Ryuko. Even Mako was going to play her part as the messenger. Who was he to sit in the infirmary licking his wounds while his friends and family risked their lives? If they failed here, no amount of treatment and rest would save him.

His eyes moved to Mr. and Mrs. Mankanshoku, who were both giving him a grave look. The look was obvious. If he got involved, he could die. Even he knew that. One tiny, minuscule mistake and his life would be over.

They already knew that the doctor's order of bed rest would be thrown out the window.

Akio gave them all a silent apology. Mako, her parents, Akiko, his brother, everyone. Even Ryuko.

Even in the face of adversity, he would play his part. If they lost here, it wouldn't only be his life on the line. It'd be Mako's, Akiko's, his brother's. Who was he to not risk himself for those he held dear?

"Satsuki. I want to help."

"I know," Satsuki nodded and turned to him, having finished up her writing on Mako's hand. "But I have a question to ask of you, Akio. When it comes down to it, are you ready to forfeit your own live to save hers?"

Mako's eyes widened and looked back and forth between Akio and Satsuki, her mouth hanging open as she tried to think of what to say.

Akio exhaled slowly through his nose, his teeth grinding silently in his mouth.

The greatest of victories didn't come without the greatest of sacrifices.

Ryuko giggled as she swung her blade wildly, the mere movement of the scissor causing blasts of wind to rock the ship, flinging everything aside. The Nudist Beach helicopters and DTRs that littered the deck were all flung overboard to meet their watery grave. If anything living was on the deck, they would have no doubt perished.

More! More! More! Her heart screamed at her. Smash them! Destroy them! KILL THEM!

Ryuko stopped her onslaught, her eyes catching a familiar tuft of red hair racing towards her.

"Excellent," She purred and turned to face him.

Tsumugu charged at her in his own green DTR, his mini-guns blazing as they fired thousands of needles at her.

Ryuko laughed and spread her arms wide, letting each and every one strike home.

"DO YOU NOT SEE THAT YOUR PLIGHT IS USELESS?!" Ryuko laughed madly and in the next instant stopped completely, her once delighted expression replaced with killing intent. "You always pissed me off the most, Mohawk Man."

With a flick of her wrist, she swung her blade at Tsumugu, sending a gust of wind directly at him.

Tsumugu rose his DTR's arms to try and withstand it, but the power behind it proved to be too much. His DTR was flung aside and slammed into the ground with him still in it.

The man tried to recover and pick himself up, but Ryuko was already on him.

Slamming her foot into the metal of the DTR, Ryuko forced him back to the ground, her blade poised at his throat.

"Really, I'm doing you a favor if you think about it," Ryuko smirked, her hand shaking with excitement at the thought of her first kill. "Now you'll be reunited with your sister!"

A flash of yellow light stopped her killing blow.

Ryuko's eyes widened, her jaw dropping slightly before it turned into a predatory grin, her lips quivering with excitement.

She was about to dirty herself with the blood of this commoner. Oh, how foolish of her! She should have known that it'd feel a thousand times better to take Junketsu's virginity by killing the pure queen herself. That'd be her first kill! Nothing else would do!

Satsuki Kiryuin!

Ryuko kicked Tsumugu away and turned to face her rival, having to bite her own lip to taste her own blood to quench her unimaginable lust.

Walking to the top of some rubble, Ryuko gazed down on her new opponent.

"Oh, so it's come to this?"

She could barely contain herself anymore at the sight of her. There she was, Satsuki Kiryuin, wearing the dish rag that Ryuko had thrown out.

Satsuki stood tall on the opposite side of the ship, her hair billowing in the wind, wearing none other than Senketsu himself.

"The two of you have teamed up, huh?"

Satsuki scowled at her, her eyes containing nothing but pure, unadulterated disgust.

"Oh, how the tables have turned," Ryuko smirked, letting her scissor blade rest on her back shoulder. Here she was, looking down on Satsuki and her hand-me-down Kamui, while she herself stood above her, wearing the vastly superior Junketsu. The irony was so delicious that she could almost taste it.

She was going to savor this moment, but more importantly, she was going to savor their deaths.

Satsuki and Senketsu would only be the first of many offerings to her Junketsu.

Aikuro watched the two stare each other down through the eyes of a binocular, far enough away that he wouldn't get caught in the

crossfire.

"Synchronizing with Senketsu right after putting him on, huh?" Aikuro mumbled while watching them. "That's our little miss Satsuki."

"I can watch no longer!" Gamagoori boomed, him, Uzu, and Nonon already moving to intervene. "Let's get in there, too!"

"We're gonna support Lady Satsuki!" Uzu agreed.

"Wait!"

The four turned their heads to the voice that stopped them.

"What do you want, underachiever?" Nonon growled at Mako. "We're a little busy, in case you didn't notice!"

"I have a message for the Elite Four from Lady Satsuki!" Mako continued, undisturbed by Nonon's words.

Satsuki and Ryuko exchanged blows, but it was obvious to anyone watching who had the upper hand.

Ryuko raised her blade with one hand, delivering a vicious overhead strike towards Satsuki.

Satsuki raised her two pieces of Bakuzan above her head, crossing them and blocking the attack from Ryuko.

The class president winced, her feet being pushed back from the blow alone. Ryuko had the upper hand in speed, strength, and surprisingly, even tactics. If Satsuki wasn't careful, the next strike would cleave her neck.

Ryuko grinned, her eyes boring holes into Satsuki's.

"You can't let go of something that Mother smashed? Talk about clingy!"

"It's not clinginess," Satsuki grunted, using all of her strength to repel Ryuko's blade. "It's vengeance!"

Pushing Ryuko away, Satsuki backpedaled, but kept her blades raised.

"Even if smashed to a million pieces, if a single fragment remains, the whole can be reconstituted! These two blades-!"

"Oh, shut up!"

Ryuko closed the distance between the two in a flash. Satsuki's eyes widened at her speed, and in a vain attempt she tried to slash out at Ryuko to stop her assault.

Seeing this coming a mile away, Ryuko deflected the careless strike and brought her leg up to deliver a counter to Satsuki's ribs.

"Gah!"

Blood and spit flew from Satsuki's mouth as the kick slammed into her gut, sending her flying across the ship and into a pile of rubble caused by Ryuko's previous rampage.

Satsuki stabbed her blade into the piece of metal she had hit, using it as leverage to pull herself to her feet.

"You talk louder than your actions," Ryuko spoke calmly as she stalked towards her. "You couldn't even control Junketsu, and you're not going to be able to summon up that knockoff's power."

Satsuki rose to her feet, her eyes narrowed at her opponent.

"You think Satsuki Kiryuin to be all talk, do you? Then I'll have to prove otherwise! Senketsu-!"

Once more, Ryuko closed the distance between the two in a heartbeat, cutting Satsuki off from her command.

"Oh, *I do!*" Ryuko's previous calmness evaporated, replaced by a twisted look of joy.

Her fist flew towards Satsuki's gut, slamming into it and stealing the breath from Satsuki's lungs.

But Satsuki was no slouch. She grabbed onto Ryuko's arm with both of her hands, locking her in place.

"S-Senketsu Senjin!" Satsuki stammered, calling out desperately to Senketsu.

Blades shot out from all over Senketsu's black surface, all of them aimed directly towards Ryuko.

Ryuko laughed and wrenched her arm free from Satsuki's grip, easily jumping away in time.

"Senketsu Shippu!"

Satsuki jumped into the air as Senketsu's bottom half turned into thrusters, blasting her towards Ryuko.

Ryuko's eyes widened, not expecting the fast turnaround by Satsuki.

Satsuki's body slammed into Ryuko's, nearly knocking her over as Satsuki flew by her.

"YOU LITTLE BITCH!" Ryuko shrieked, her lust to spill Satsuki's blood replaced by a boiling anger to kill her.

"I'm just getting started!" Satsuki screamed back, turning her head to find Ryuko.

Except that she was already gone.

"What?!" She exclaimed.

Before she could even hope to counter, Ryuko appeared above her.

"YOU WILL PAY WITH YOUR BLOOD!"

Bringing her blade up, she slammed the hilt of her scissor into Satsuki's head. But before she could fall to the ground, Ryuko grabbed onto her hair to stop her descent. Twirling around in mid air, Ryuko used her momentum to throw Satsuki straight to the ground.

Satsuki slammed into the metal surface, the force of Ryuko's throw causing the metal to dent.

Ryuko landed on the deck gracefully, her red scissor blade trembling in her hand.

" *Break her. Kill her. Eviscerate her. Defile her,* " Ryuko muttered as she walked towards her fallen prey, her finger nails digging into her palms.

"Senketsu Shippu!"

Satsuki flew from the crater caused by her body, racing towards Ryuko once more.

"Senketsu Senjin!"

More blades appeared on Senketsu's surface as Satsuki began to spin in midair, her body creating a razor blade as she flew towards Ryuko.

With an expressionless face, Ryuko rose her blade to block Satsuki's attack.

Spill her blood.

Akio stood unseen on the sidelines, his cloak billowing in the wind. He could hardly stand sitting still as the fight raged on before him. More than anything he wanted to jump in and help Satsuki out, but

he knew he couldn't. That wasn't his role in this. So for now, he had to sit and watch.

His eyes were trained on the fight before him, his body reacting with a shiver or a twitch every time Satsuki was hit.

Satsuki was trying her damndest, he'd give her that. Everyone of her attacks were coordinated with Senketsu beautifully. If he didn't know any better, he would assume that the two were in perfect synchronization. She maneuvered Senketsu with a veteran's experience, even able to catch the vastly superior Ryuko off guard a few times, like with her combination of Senjin and Shippu to create a spinning ball of razor sharp blades. But it wouldn't last. If he could notice that they weren't synchronized, than Ryuko could too. It was only a matter of time before Ryuko saw through the gimmick completely and wiped the floor with her.

Even so, that was the plan all along. Satsuki was only meant to be a distraction, and she was doing so beautifully. In a few more seconds, Satsuki will have Ryuko just where she wants her.

Akio watched as Satsuki and Ryuko jumped away from each other, both falling into stance as they readied themselves to continue the fight.

His heart screamed at him to try and talk Ryuko down, but his mind gave him a firm no. This was nothing like that day when Ryuko was swallowed by Senketsu. Back then, Akio had been able to connect with her and talk her down. But now, he was unsure if such a thing could be possible, despite what Satsuki had told him earlier in the infirmary. He didn't know what was going on in Ryuko's head, but he knew she was doing all of this purposefully. If Akio stepped in, he'd be killed on the spot.

So, he'd have to bide his time and wait for his turn to intervene.

And not a moment before that.

Ryuko and Satsuki stared each other down, neither one budging an inch. They watched each other closely, just waiting for a faint sign of an oncoming attack. The minute one moved, the other would retaliate.

Biting her tongue to calm herself, Ryuko savored the taste of her own blood, then spit.

"Ryuko!"

Ryuko's eyebrows twitched, hearing a familiar voice that she hadn't heard in what felt like years.

"Take of that outfit and put me on," Senketsu pleaded with her.

Ryuko threw her head back and laughed.

"No way. As if I'd stoop to looking that ridiculous ever again," Ryuko replied, her spare hand running down her stomach and to her pelvis as she felt Junketsu with her fingers. What an idiot he was to try and reason with her. As if she'd ever give this up. The feeling of Junketsu on her skin... it made her shiver in pleasure to stop and think about it.

"I look ridiculous? Do you really mean that, Ryuko?"

"Of course I do," Ryuko answered simply. "What else would you call it but ridiculous when you can't tell if you're wearing anything?"

"To access the Life Fibers' power, while at the same time ensuring the wearer is not inadvertently enslaved, by minimizing the surface area in direct contact. That is the purpose of Life Fiber Synchronization," Satsuki spoke up, making her voice heard. "You should call it a stroke of human genius."

Ryuko rolled her eyes. What crap.

"Genius my ass! All I see is fear," She retorted. "You want the power of clothing, but you don't want your soul to be taken over. That getup

is that half-assed mindset in a nutshell. All it is is pathetic!"

"That's not true!" Senketsu rebutted. "When we were synchronized, you wore me and I was worn by you."

"As it stands now, you are only being worn by Junketsu."

Ryuko's lips tugged upwards in a smirk. Were they really trying to reason with her? What fools. Once you've seen greener grass, why would you ever go back?

"And what's wrong with that?" Ryuko giggled as she felt Junketsu once more with her gloved fingers. "Being worn by it feels so amazing! I can't stand it! Humanity was born to be worn by Life Fibers! Being worn by them is the ultimate bliss!"

Ryuko began to sway back and forth, her mind almost lost in the throes of pleasure, her smirk being replaced with a smile full of giddiness. Junketsu felt sooo good on her skin... it was almost orgasmic! She could hardly control herself!

"That is the bliss of slavery!" Satsuki countered, bringing Ryuko back to reality.

"If they have a problem with it, then they're welcome to die," Ryuko whispered to herself.

Raising her scissor blade, Ryuko charged Satsuki. The time for talk was over. She was going to kill her, kill the others, and then return to her mother.

"Senketsu Senjin!"

After a brief pause, red blades shot from Senketsu's body to intercept the oncoming Ryuko.

Ryuko swung her scissor, the red sword cutting clean through all of Senketsu's projected blades.

Senketsu grunted, his eye twitching in pain.

"Oh, I get it now," Ryuko chirped as she came to a stop before them. "I knew it! You haven't really mastered wearing that Kamui properly."

Satsuki gasped. Her ruse was up.

"Senketsu Shippu!" Satsuki cried and jumped back, Senketsu's bottom half turning into thrusters once more.

"Too slow."

Ryuko's hand lashed out, grabbing onto Satsuki's skirt as she tried to fly away. With a flick of her wrist she tossed Satsuki across the ship, her body skipping across the ground.

Twisting in midair, Satsuki corrected herself.

"Senjin Shippu!"

"Like that would work a second time!"

Ryuko materialized directly in front of Satsuki, raising her blade and slashing out at Satsuki.

Satsuki tried to block it, but she was too slow.

"Ngh!"

The strike sent Satsuki to the ground, her blades wrenched from her grasp. It was a miracle that she was only knocked aside and not cut in half.

Ryuko stalked towards her, collapsing her scissor blade and cracking her knuckles. Oh, she was going to kill her alright, but she was going to enjoy it first.

"Is that really all Satsuki Kiryuin is made of?" Ryuko mused as she bent down to pick her up by her hair. "It's too bad. I was expecting

more, really."

Raising her knee, she slammed it into Satsuki's face, causing the girl to recoil. But before she could fall back to the ground, Ryuko grabbed onto her hair and held it tight as she delivered punch after punch to Satsuki's 'perfect' face.

"Synchronization, my ass!" Ryuko grunted as she threw another punch. "That was nothing but pathetic! You two are *nothing!* "

Ryuko varied with her strikes, throwing in a few kicks in there as well as the punches.

"And you tell ME that I'm the one being worn by clothing!" Ryuko shouted, delivering a knee to Satsuki's abdomen and then a punch to her face. "You haven't changed one damn bit since the time you wore Junketsu! It's high time someone punished you for your failures!"

Ryuko delivered a barrage of punches to Satsuki's head and gut, then finished it off with a knee to her face, and finally finishing off with a kick to her chest.

Satsuki cried out in pain as she fell to her knees, her arms cradling her stomach as she gasped for air.

"What, no more talk?" Ryuko smiled. "Can't stand on your own two feet? Here, I can help with that."

Reaching down, she grabbed Satsuki by her hair and lifted her off the ground once more, then moved that hand to her throat.

"Feel better now, Little Miss Satsuki?" Ryuko laughed, her hand tightening around Satsuki's throat, her ears savoring the sound of every labored breath.

"Ryuko, stop!" Senketsu cried out. "I admit, Satsuki cannot hear-"

"Enough talk," Ryuko interrupted, her glare turning to Senketsu. "Stop talking as if your words will make a difference. The girl you once knew is gone, so save your words for someone who gives a shit."

Ryuko brought back out her scissor blade.

"Like God, maybe. Or wherever the hell I'm sending you."

Bringing her blade around, she smacked Satsuki in the face with the hilt.

Satsuki fell to the ground several feet away, her body sprawling across the ship's metal floor. She tried to pick herself up, but her battered body was just having none of it.

Ryuko expanded her scissor blade as she walked over to them, its length nearly doubling in size.

Raising her arms above her head, she readied her blade to deal the finishing blow.

"Don't you dare mock Lady Satsuki!"

Ryuko's head twitched. Within seconds, a barrage of missiles shot from the rocket launchers of Nonon Jakuzure collided with her body, exploding on impact. Not that it did anything, but the action alone brought great anger to Ryuko.

"How DARE you!" Nonon shrieked, letting loose another salvo at Ryuko.

"Butt out!" Ryuko growled, her scissor blade twirling through the air as she cut through each missile, their parts flying behind her and exploding harmlessly in the air.

With that dealt with, Ryuko raised her blade again, more than ready to kill that pink-haired-

Uzu Sanageyama jumped through the smoke of the explosions, wielding a pair of Nudist Beach made Tailor Daggers.

"Good god," Ryuko growled, readying her blade. Was the entire circus going to show up?

Uzu attacked Ryuko with ferocity, but she repelled each attack as if it were nothing.

"If you can't see what is in her heart, you can't see anything!" Uzu shouted as the two exchanged blows.

"Quit pissing me off!" Ryuko snarled. "I've had enough of all of you! What can you even do with that little knife?!"

Ryuko swung with intent to kill at Uzu's chest, but he jumped away in time to dodge the blow, his body disappearing among the smoke cloud.

The smoke began to blow away, revealing the three giant ship cannons that were aimed directly at Ryuko.

"What can he do?" Inumuta called out. "Lure you into my firing range, I suppose."

With a press of a button, the cannons fired point blank, sending a wall of fire flying down the ship's deck and enveloping Ryuko in its flame.

Ryuko only rolled her eyes, completely unscathed by the cannons' shot. Really? A ship's cannons? That was they're big idea?

The flames dispersed after a few moments, revealing Ryuko's unscathed form.

"Did you really think that would do anything to Junketsu?"

"No," A voice answered from right behind her. "But it did allow me to get in close."

Ryuko gasped, her eyes darting to the giant Gamagoori, his Emergency Rescue Suction Device pressed to her back.

"What the-!"

"I'm going to rip Junketsu off of you!" Gamagoori shouted, activating his device.

Ryuko began to writhe around, trying to struggle out of Gamagoori's grip. The device began to do its magic, quickly sucking Junketsu's cloth into the machinery.

"Satsuki, you bitch! This was your plan all along?"

"Indeed!" Satsuki answered plainly. "Senketsu and I cannot defeat you in our current state. However, if I give the Elite Four a fighting chance, it is possible!"

"Son of a bitch..." Ryuko grumbled. They were *really* making it hard on her. Why didn't they just lay down and die? It was going to happen anyways, they might as well make it easier for themselves. "To think you'd stoop so low to use yourself as bait. How the mighty have fallen."

"I'd do anything to win," Satsuki replied, coming to stand before her. "Did you forget that that is my *modus operandi*?"

"And now we're going to pull you out of Junketsu, and make you come back to your senses!"

Ryuko only rolled her eyes. Yeah, good luck with that.

To prove her point, the suction device's barrel became clogged, unable to rotate anymore.

"Why can't it separate Matoi?!"

Satsuki's eyes twitched.

"RUN GAMAGOORI!"

Gamagoori looked up from Ryuko, his eyes wide at the urgency in Satsuki's voice.

Like an angel from the heavens, Nui Harime appeared between the two, her purple scissor blade cutting through Gamagoor's machine and ripping it in two.

"Damn it..."

Akio watched on from afar, his nails digging into his skin. Just the sight of Nui Harime made his blood boil and forced his mind to recall each and every one of the savage whippings she had delivered to him. She had been relentless with him, not even batting an eyelash at the cries of pain that had escaped his lips. She even did it all with a smile on her face, not once faltering with her strikes.

His wounds began to burn beneath their bandages, as if they too were remembering the feel of the barbed whip.

His arms began shaking, wanting nothing more than to feel the skin of her neck beneath his fingertips, to hear the sound of her neck snapping in his ears.

Akio had never wanted to kill another living thing more than he wanted to kill Nui. Taking another's life was never an easy thing to do, but in this case he could do so with a smile on his face.

"What do I do...?" Akio mumbled to himself, his legs trembling in anticipation. Satsuki had told him only intervene under one circumstance, but this was different. Ryuko was one thing, but Ryuko and Nui was a different thing altogether. The two of them would kill everyone effortlessly and relentlessly. He couldn't just let that happen!

But he had to believe in Satsuki and the Elite Four. With the five of them together again, they worked like a well oiled machine. He had to believe in that foundation, otherwise there would be nothing else he could believe in.

Just stay calm, Akio, he told himself as he watched Ryuko start her attack on the Elite Four and Satsuki. As long as they're still standing, it isn't over yet.

"CHEW ON THIS!" Ryuko shouted as Junketsu's shoulder pieces fired at Satsuki like missiles, knocking her blades out of her hands.

Akio's eyes widened. His time was fast approaching.

Ryuko's scissor blade appeared between Satsuki and Senketsu, ripping the Kamui from Satsuki's body.

But Ryuko didn't stop there. With Satsuki defenseless, she raised her blade to finish the job.

"NO!" Akio cried, his feet already moving to where they were.

"Don't!" Another voice cried, making Akio's blood run cold.

His pace quickened.

Mako had put herself in between Ryuko and Satsuki.

Mako raised her arms above her head, already preparing to deliver one of her famous speeches.

"I understand why you're angry, Ryuko! I mean, if you can't take that outfit off, you can't take a bath or wash yourself, and you can't get dressed up for a date! But even so, that doesn't mean it's okay to go on a rampage like this!"

Ryuko tilted her head to the side, frowning.

"What are you talking about?"

"Mankanshoku, run!" Gamagoori called out to her desperately. "This isn't the Matoi you used to know!"

Mako shook her head, refusing to budge.

"Ryuko is always Ryuko! Even if you've got Life Fibers inside of you, even if you're mad that you're not human, you're still Ryuko! And Senketsu is your Sunday best, same as always!"

Ryuko's frown turned into a snarl. Was she really friends with this idiot? How low must she have fallen to befriend someone as stupid as this?

Nui sighed, raising her own scissor blade above her head as she stalked towards Mako.

"That girl is such a pest."

Senketsu saw Nui walking towards Mako, intent to kill written all over her face.

"MAKO!" Senketsu shouted, dashing across the deck on his sleeves to save her.

Just before the blade hit Mako, Senketsu jumped in between the two, knocking her aside. The two rolled across the ground for several feet, eventually coming to a stop when a pair of hands grabbed them.

"Mako, get back to safety. I'll handle things from here."

"Huh?" Senketsu blinked, his eye looking up to the voice that had stopped their tumble.

Akio looked down at Senketsu, his gaze unyielding. He outstretched a hand to the Kamui, his palm face up.

Senketsu looked back and forth between the offered hand and Akio, giving a moment's pause before placing his sleeve in his hand.

Nui sighed again at watching that boy Takahiro help Mako and Senketsu up. She still didn't understand Ragyo's true intention with him, but Nui was never one to doubt her lady. She only wished that she had been allowed to kill him, that's all. That stupid face with its stupid look of hope was insulting to her. She wanted to wipe it off, preferably with the edge of a blade.

Maybe she should? Now seemed like the perfect chance. He was still injured, after all. And if he was out of the picture, things would be much-

A black blade slashed at her throat, causing her to jump back.

Nui giggled and hopped away, dodging another strike from Satsuki's Bakuzan.

On second thought, this might be better!

Satsuki swung at her again and again, and Nui continued to dodge it.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" Nui frowned as she dodged another blade. "No ordinary human can beat me!"

"Perhaps," Satsuki admitted. "But the blade of my heart isn't broken just yet!"

"Oh, brother... you're just so stubborn!"

Nui brought her arm around, her purple blade cutting through the air as it arched towards Satsuki.

Satsuki deflected it, lashing out with a strike of her own. The two began to trade blows faster than the human eye could follow, neither one relenting in the slightest.

"I don't know why you're trying so hard," Nui grumbled, slashing at Satsuki. "Ryuko belongs to Lady Ragyo now."

"We'll see about that!"

"Are you trying to appeal to her feelings, too? That'll never work! You've gotten soft, Satsuki!"

"It is because of you that I believe it is possible to turn the tables!" Satsuki countered.

Nui blinked. "Me?"

Satsuki's blade struck through the hole of the scissor blade, locking it in place as Satsuki pushed down on it.

"If Ryuko Matoi has truly gone over to your side body and soul, why haven't you given her that scissor blade? You still doubt her loyalty."

Nui gasped, her fake heart skipping a beat. How did she-

"And besides," Satsuki began to grin, an expression unfamiliar on her face. "I already have someone else to appeal to her feelings, and he's quite adept at it, too. Combine that with your doubts, and we are certain to prove victorious!"

Nui's brow furrowed, her eyes immediately scanning for where that boy was standing only seconds before. She had to kill him now!

He was gone.

"Your agitation has made me more convinced than ever! Victory will be ours!"

Nonon, Uzu, and Gamagoori all jumped clean over Satsuki, all of them striking out at Nui.

Nui gritted her teeth and skipped away, dodging all of their blows.

No. It wouldn't end this way. She was wrong. Satsuki was wrong, and Nui would prove it to her!

"Ryuko!" Nui cried out to her. "Kill Akio, along with Senketsu! Give these softies with their 'hope' nonsense a dose of cold, hard reality!"

Ryuko raised her head, her expression emotionless as she nodded.

"You got it."

She wouldn't have to look far.

Akio walked towards Ryuko, his heart thumping in his chest. This was it. This is what it all came down to. All he had to do was distract Ryuko and hopefully appeal to who she once was. When that failed, there were two back up plans in place. The first, and the more preferred, was that with Ryuko distracted Satsuki would be able to strike her in the chest and tear a wound through Junketsu. Then, all Akio would need to do, was jam Senketsu into the wound. That was option number one.

The second one... well, it was much more gritty and risky.

This whole thing was obviously very risky and quite tricky. Ryuko was a ticking time bomb. At any possible second she might snap and murder someone. And if anyone intervened too soon, things could become dangerous.

Akio came to a stop several feet from Ryuko, who had surprisingly allowed her prey to step so close to her without attacking.

Ryuko looked him up and down, her expression blank as she scrutinized him.

"What, do you have something you want to say before you die?"

He had to appeal to the Ryuko she once was. Logically, it seemed stupid. The logical part of his mind said it wouldn't work whatsoever. His heart, however, believed otherwise.

"As a matter of fact, I do. But I warn you, it's going to be long," Akio replied, raising a hand to count as he listed things off. "First, your name is Ryuko Matoi. You're seventeen years old, but on any given day you act ten years younger or ten years older."

Ryuko frowned, her lips twitching in agitation.

"Are you really-"

"You're stubborn as hell, with the temperament to match. You're afraid of needles, but apparently not blades. You like beer. You like lemons. You love Mako's mom's cooking. You said you liked my cooking, but that might have been a lie to make me feel better. Unsurprisingly, you yourself have no skill in the kitchen whatsoever. Your favorite color is green. Your favorite movie is Kill Bill, what a surprise. You enjoy making fun of my dancing, but you certainly seemed to enjoy it when we danced. Funnily enough, you enjoy star gazing. Also, I'm pretty convinced you haven't read a book in your life."

"Just shut up!" Ryuko shouted, her anger rising with each word. What the hell was this dumb shit? "Your words mean nothing!"

Akio took a step forward, only raising his voice despite her protests.

"Despite your tough exterior, you're actually quite the softie on the inside. I consider myself lucky when I get to see that side of you. You're insanely loyal to those you love. If anyone were to harm your family, you'd give it back to them tenfold."

Now it was Akio's turn to look Ryuko up and down, his expression filled with disgust and dismay.

"Now look at you. I see none of that in the girl before me. I can't even recognize the girl I fell in love with anymore," Akio continued, waving a hand at her. "Is this really what you want to become to wear Junketsu? You would side villains you were trying to destroy? At least when you were swallowed up by Senketsu you were still a shadow of your former self. Even as that barbarous monster, you still had more intelligence than this idiot I see before me. Are you really going to throw yourself away to wear that piece of clothing? That's pathetic, and even more it's shameful. Is that how you would treat Senketsu?"

"Enough of your talk!" Ryuko spat, brandishing her blade as she walked forwards. "I'm going to spill your blood all over this deck!"

"Go ahead," Akio shrugged, but inside his heart skipped a beat. "You'd only be proving my point. Go ahead and kill me. See what that accomplishes. Just know that you will have to live with the decisions you make today."

Ryuko growled, her hand cracking as it tightened around the hilt of her blade. As she moved towards him, Akio exhaled slowly, his hand moving to the pin on his gloved wrist underneath his cloak. If Satsuki didn't intervene soon, he'd have to-

"Ryuko, you can't!"

His breath caught in his throat. For an instant, time froze in Akio's mind. He knew who that voice belonged to, and it killed him to realize it.

Mr. Mankanshoku, followed by Mataro, Mrs. Mankanshoku, and Guts slid in front of Akio, their arms spread wide to protect him.

"What are you doing?!" Akio hissed. They were going to get themselves killed!

"Move it," Ryuko ordered, her eyes still trained on Akio.

"Stop this, Ryuko," Mr. Mankanshoku told her.

"You're actually protecting that man?" Ryuko asked, her eyes moving to the back alley doctor.

"I will protect any member of the Mankanshoku family," Mr. Mankanshoku replied calmly. "I will protect you, too, Ryuko."

"Me?"

And then the icing on the cake to make Akio's heart stop, Mako appeared in front of them all, her arms spread protectively as well.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't sit back and watch this!" Mako cried, her lower lip trembling as tears welled in her eyes. "If you killed Akio right now, the one who would be hurt most of all would be you! He loves you, Ryuko! So much so that he'd risk his own life for this! And I know deep down, you still love him too!"

While the Mankanshokus' speech touched Akio greatly, Ryuko remained unmoved. If anything, she only looked more annoyed.

"And I know you still love us, too. So take that silly thing off, and we can get you back in your Sunday best. Just... don't do this! Please!"

"God, your voice is so annoying."

Ryuko brought her blade to her hip, its point pointing directly at Mako's heart. Things were spiraling out of control, fast.

Or, so he thought.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Satsuki descending upon Ryuko, her blades poised and ready. She was going to make it in time! They were actually going to do it! Even though it was on Akio to provide the distraction, it was actually the Mankanshokus who saved the day! He... he almost couldn't believe it. It was nearly too good to be true!

And just when he thought they had won, Ryuko disappeared.

Akio was already moving.

"NO!"

There it was. That sound.

The sound of a blade piercing flesh. A sound that few will hear, but one that will never be forgotten.

Blood splattered across the ground.

Mako fell to the ground. She looked down at her chest, her eyes widening in horror at the blood that covered her skin.

"What..."

That's all that Ryuko could utter. Heartless as she may now be, she was as surprised as everyone else.

As if God had granted him speed unheard of, Akio had ran between the line of Mankanshokus, pushing Mako to the ground and taking the blade in her stead.

And there you have it!

Oh, boy, am I going to kill the OC I created?

I almost feel like I'm beating a dead horse with how much I've injured and hurt my poor creation, but it's just the way the cookie crumbles. It's one of those things that just happens as you write the story you've pictured in your head, so my apologies Akio. I'll make it up to you? By... killing you? Maybe? Who knows, I guess we'll see how next chapter plays out.

Next chapter will be out no later than Thursday (if classes don't rail me), because I really, REALLY want to write a certain scene.

It has been in my head since the beginning of this story, so I'm more than a little excited to write it.

I've been pretty transparent with what happens next, but I hope I still surprise you somewhat. If you think you know what happens next, well, you probably do. And oh goodness, I can't wait to write it.

See you soon!

Love Is All You Need

Author's Notes:

Before we get cracking, I'd like to give you all my sincerest thanks. With that last chapter, Before My Body is Dry became the most reviewed story for Kill la Kill! Thank you all so, so much for your support of this story. I've written for two other genres now, and without a doubt the KKK genre is my favorite. You all have been so nice and supportive of me and my writing, it warms my heart. Reading your kind reviews and chatting with you all has been amazing, and in many cases has made my day much, much better. It all only makes me want to write more, and to write better.

We're winding down now, with only maybe another few episodes left of the anime. But with that being said, I don't plan on stopping once the canon story ends. I have plans for some stuff after the OVA.

Anyhow, now onto the chapter. With this chapter, we'll get to arguably the most important chapter in this story. For many reasons, which you'll have to find out yourself. So, I hope you all enjoy it!

There's also a little Easter egg hidden in there. ;)

Now then, on with the show!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

The ship deck grew quiet, the only audible sound being Akio's labored, wet breathing.

"AKIO!"

Satsuki fell upon Ryuko, her blades aimed directly for her heart. However, Ryuko saw her before she could even hope to strike, and knocked her away effortlessly. Akio barely registered it, but with Satsuki out of the picture, things were looking even more grim for the boy.

Satsuki hit the ground and tumbled away, her blades scattering across the deck.

Ryuko turned her head back to Akio as he began to cough.

"... Why."

A few droplets of blood left his mouth, staining Ryuko's pure white Kamui.

Akio slowly looked down to the sword that now was stuck in his abdomen.

Well, that was certainly not a part of the plan.

Ryuko's scissor had ran clean through him, skewering his chest and going clean out the other side. The blade must have punctured one of his lungs, as he could feel blood rush into his throat, nearly drowning him. God knew what else it had hit.

Blood began to pour from his fatal wound, falling into a puddle on the floor.

Akio coughed again, more blood spilling from his mouth. Soon, he would drown in his own blood.

"Why."

He could feel tears well in his eyes, his ears only slightly registering Ryuko's words. In his final moments, his life flashed before his eyes. He had always thought that that was a load of bullshit, but it really wasn't. He saw his childhood with Aikuro, then his time at Nudist

Beach, finalized with his time with Ryuko and Mako. He saw his short time with his birth family. Hell, even his time with Satsuki.

And in those memories, Akio realized something about himself.

Deep down, all of his life, Akio wanted to be a hero, as cliché as that sounded. The knight in shining armor that came in and rescued the hostage princess. The super hero that swooped in and stopped the bad guy while saving the lives of many. That had always been his secret motivation; to be able to help those in need. In the end, it seemed that those lofty ideals were for naught. How much did he really change? In the end, he would only accomplished what every other human being did: death.

It was a childhood daydream for many boys to be a hero, but one that rarely became realized. But that didn't stop Akio. He thought, maybe if he was quick enough, strong enough, smart enough, that he could make a difference. That he would be able to change one thing, be able to save one person.

Like Ryuko. To save her from killing someone that she loved.

It seems that he failed in that regard.

In the distance he could hear someone calling his name. Aikuro? Mako? He hoped it wasn't Akiko. At this point, it really didn't matter. It was too late for that.

"I asked you a question."

"... B-b-because," Akio stopped to cough out more blood. "I-I-I... had to... had to... be me..."

But it wasn't too late to make a difference. Just because Death was calling his name, it didn't mean that he was finished.

That was one thing about Akio Takahiro. He was a stubborn son of a bitch. Stubborn to the very end.

"That doesn't make any sense," Ryuko mumbled. "Why would you waste your own life for someone else? What does that ever accomplish? Do you not want to live? Do you not want to enjoy life's pleasures?"

Ryuko's words hurt his already fractured heart, but he kept on.

"Y-you... would have... d-done the... same."

Ryuko sighed, twisting her blade in his chest to elicit a scream of pain from the man. Blood began to drain more freely from his wound as it opened further.

"I suppose you can be Junketsu's first."

The darkness was closing in on him. His eyes were struggling to stay open, his legs struggling to stand. His heart fluttered in his chest, and his mind was moving at a snail's pace.

"Because you are interesting, I'll make this quick."

He couldn't move his feet, in this dark.

Ryuko tried to pull her blade from his body, but Akio's hands had grabbed a hold of it. His grip was iron. Despite the pain in his hands, he wouldn't let go.

He didn't want to be, all alone.

"What?" Ryuko growled, trying to pull her blade from his body once more but failing.

He couldn't feel the heat, in his blood.

Ryuko lashed out and took a hold of his neck, forcing his weary eyes to look directly at her.

"What are you playing at?!"

He could still remember what she said.

"Do you... feel the same?" He had asked of her.

" Yes, " She had replied.

Using that love to fuel his heart, he would set her free from the cage she was trapped in.

Ryuko tugged harder on the blade, but it wouldn't budge. It was as if someone else was giving Akio strength unheard of, making it impossible for Ryuko to free her blade.

"Why won't you just die already?!"

He couldn't lose his way. They would never get a better chance than this. To have even a hope of success, the two would have to move as one. There were no do-overs or second tries.

The wind began to pick up between Akio and Ryuko, as if it was emanating from Akio himself.

"Don't... be afraid... sweetheart," Akio mumbled, his glare unwavering as he stared into Ryuko's eyes. The blood that was once flowing from his wound began to recede back into his body. "This is the only way."

His cloak fell from his shoulders, revealing the black and red of a familiar sailor uniform. It was as if Senketsu's unveiling had caused strength to flow back into his limbs, giving him the brief burst of energy to do what had to be done.

Ryuko's eyes widened as she unconsciously took a step back, only to be stopped when two black straps of cloth bound to her hands to keep her in place.

"You-!"

"Now!"

The cloak that had once covered Akio's body turned to shreds as Senketsu activated; except that the two of them had no intention of becoming synchronized, even if they moved like it. No, there would be no fight; this would be their final gambit.

There was no Life Fiber Synchronization. They wouldn't actually become one. He would not be worn by Senketsu, nor would Senketsu be worn by him. This was only two friends working towards a common goal, their love and determination fueling the fire in their hearts.

Several more black straps shot from Senketsu's body, wrapping around Ryuko's limbs to completely bind her and keep her in place.

Ryuko fought against her bindings, but it was getting her nowhere. The attack had caught her completely off guard, giving Akio and Senketsu just the opportunity they needed to deal the finishing blow.

"DO IT, SENKETSU!"

"Right!" Senketsu answered him before the words had even left Akio's mouth. After nearly a year of watching Akio fight, he knew exactly what to do.

The fabric that would originally become Senketsu's top snaked down Akio's arms, pooling at his fists.

As Akio raised his arms to the sky, Senketsu's cloth expanded outwards and hardened, forming two makeshift blades at the end of each of his fists. The sunlight reflected off of the blades, nearly blinding Ryuko.

"S-stop!" Ryuko screamed as she fought harder against her bindings. "You fucking idiot, stop it!"

Akio brought his arms down with force he never knew he had, the blades on his fists going in-between the groove of Junketsu's chest

piece. Wrenching one blade up and the other down, Akio tore apart the Kamui.

"NO!" Ryuko screeched, but it was too late.

Akio rose his arms and brought them down once more, Senketsu's blades tearing into her skin.

Ryuko threw her head back and screamed in pain, but Akio ignored it. There was only one thing left to do.

"Senketsu, you know what to do!"

"You don't have to tell me twice! I'm coming, Ryuko!"

Senketsu's blades dissolved into her body, followed by the rest of Senketsu as his fabric snaked its way up Akio's body and down his arms.

Ryuko arched her back as she began to convulse as Senketsu was sucked into her wound, her screams of pain and surprise only increasing in ferocity.

With Senketsu no longer on him, Akio collapsed, only to be held up by the blade above his abdomen. His eyes were growing tired...

With the rest of the strength he possessed, he looked up to Ryuko.

"I... forgive... -"

Before he could finish, he felt his consciousness leave his body.

Darkness. Unimaginable darkness.

He was floating. He couldn't feel his body, nor could he see anything, but he was conscious. He didn't know if he was alive or dead, but he knew he was somewhere in between. In a realm nonexistent to both. Or at least, that's what he thought.

Wait... Akio frowned. How can a dead man be thinking? Wait a second. Am I even dead?

Well, if he was, he'd be lying if he said it wasn't a bit anticlimactic. He was expecting... well something! Anything, really. Floating around on a cloud would have worked. Shit, even some flames would have been more preferable than this darkness.

Or nothing at all, if that happened to be how the afterlife worked. He wasn't sure where he stood on that.

Akio's brow furrowed. It wasn't completely dark, on a second thought. There were red lines here and there, the glowing red color of it reminding him of... something. Something important. Why was it so important?

"Why is that color so familiar?" Akio said aloud to no one in particular. Who would be there, after all?

Akio blinked, trying to remember how exactly he got here in the first place. The only problem was that he couldn't remember a thing.

"Open your eyes," A startlingly familiar voice called out to him.

"What?" Akio murmured. Were they not open already?

"Come on, Akio. This is important."

He could swear his eyes were open. And who was this voice commanding him-

"Eyes, Akio. Open. Them."

As if that flipped a switch in his brain, his eyes opened. Solid ground materialized beneath his feet, stopping his free floating.

Akio blinked at the unfamiliar setting in front of him. A regal chapel stood before him, the bell in its tower ringing, signaling the beginning of a wedding. The chapel itself almost took his breath away. The

paint that covered it was a beautiful shade of white, contrasting with the shiny brown of its giant, oaken doors. A cross was centered in the middle of the brown door, but it almost seemed redundant with its placing. This building was clearly a chapel. Just the air around it could tell him that much.

Strangely enough, the air around the chapel looked grey, as if everything else was just worse in comparison. Looking up to the sky, Akio attributed the depressing grey tones to the thunderclouds.

"Go into the chapel."

Akio rose an eyebrow and looked down at himself.

He was wearing a two piece suit, his jacket and slacks being black while his undershirt was white. A red tie was tied around his neck, with a very intriguing design on the front of it. It almost looked like... an eye?

If he didn't know any better, he'd say that his tie was talking to him.

Looking around and shrugging, Akio walked forwards, deciding he had nothing better to do.

The minute his hand touched that door handle, a shock reverberated through his body. With that shock came every single memory of Akio Takahiro's life. And not just his memories, but Ryuko Kiryuin's as well.

Akio's mind began racing, as if his brain's previous emptiness had never happened.

Ryuko Kiryuin... a fake identity fabricated by Ragyo to ensnare Ryuko to do her dirty work.

It all made so much sense now. Ryuko would never willingly join Ragyo and Nui. It was because the framework of her mind had been tampered with, creating an entire fake life and replacing it with her

real one. In that fake life, Ryuko lived happily. Her mother loved her, and she succeeded in everything she did. She went to school, met some faceless entity, and then got married. On the surface, it was a carefree and sweet life, but it was fake nonetheless.

No wonder Ryuko fought for her mother. If someone had tampered with his memories like this, Akio would be hard pressed to say he would do any different.

"Go inside."

Akio flinched, remembering only now that Senketsu was with him, and was in fact the suit he was wearing. If it were a different time and place, he might jump for joy at the prospect of finally being able to hear the Kamui.

Pushing on the handle, the door didn't budge. Frowning, he tried harder, but still got nowhere. Getting fed up with it, Akio raised his leg, opting to kick the door open.

The church doors flew open with the kick, even breaking off one of the handles and flinging it across the room.

"I'm counting on you, Akio," Senketsu told him as they walked in.

As the room became revealed to him, Akio's eyes scanned the area, finally landing on the bride at the end of the aisle.

"Ryuko," Akio muttered, his feet already moving towards her.

Ryuko turned to face him, her face twisting into a scowl. She looked just like she did when she had been wearing Junketsu; the bags under her eyes coupled with red eye shadow. Akio hated looking at it. It was so much different than the Ryuko he knew that it made him sick to his stomach just to look at this abomination.

"What do you want?"

"I'm here to bring you back," Akio answered automatically.

Ryuko's scowl deepened. Reaching into her dress, she pulled out her scissor blade and pointed it at Akio.

Akio winced, his stomach turning upside down at the sight of it, but it wouldn't be enough to stop him.

"I'll kill anyone who ruins my happiness."

"... Your happiness?" Akio mumbled before letting out a snort. "You call this happiness? This fake life?"

"Do not insult me!" Ryuko screamed, shaking her blade at him. "This is my life! It *is* real, damn it!"

"Bullshit," Akio disagreed as he began walking towards her. "This chapel is fake. Your groom is fake. This wedding is fake."

"Shut up! It's real, all of it is real!"

Akio shook his head as he came to a stop a few feet from her, his eyes moving to the building around him. He hadn't been lying when he said this entire thing was a sham. There wasn't even a single person in attendance. The groom didn't even count, because as far as Akio could tell, he didn't even have a face. This 'wedding' didn't even have a pastor. It almost made him sad to look at it all, because it *was* real to Ryuko. Right now, in this moment, this was what she wanted more than anything.

This fake life and this fake wedding.

Looking down at his chest, he became very aware of the fact that he was wearing a suit.

"Is this really what you want?" Akio whispered as he met Ryuko's eyes.

"It isn't fake!" Ryuko repeated, if only to reassure herself of that fact. "This is-"

"ENOUGH!" Akio raised his voice, his shout echoing through the church. "I mean... damn it Ryuko! Are you really this stupid? I can give you this! All of it! Everything to the last detail! The only difference would be that it'd be *real*! You don't need some faceless groom and some dead chapel. I can give you the real thing! Better yet, I'd be happy to!"

Ryuko's sword arm began to tremble, her angry scowl becoming mixed with a look of sadness.

"S-shut up!" Ryuko continued regardless, her emotions starting to get the best of her. "Just, just shut your mouth!"

Akio walked forwards and up the steps of the aisle, coming to a stop directly in front of her.

"No, I won't. I refuse to just lie down and die."

Ryuko swung her blade haphazardly at Akio, making it easy for him to counter. Grabbing on to the hilt of her scissor, he pushed the blade down to the ground and closed the distance between the two in a flash.

Pressing his forehead against hers, Akio stared straight into her eyes.

"Snap out of it. This isn't you, and you know it."

The rest of Ryuko's body began to shake, her lips trembling as she tried to speak.

"S-shut u-up," Ryuko stammered. "Your words are just empty promises."

"Oh?" Akio rose an eyebrow. "Well, I'll have to prove you wrong then. I don't plan on breaking any more promises."

Akio's hand moved down the hilt of her sword, eventually making it to one of hers. Her hand felt like ice beneath his fingertips; clammy

and lifeless.

"If you're so intent on staying here, go ahead and kill me and give up on being the Ryuko I know. Kill me and prove me wrong. Prove to me that you don't remember the love you confessed to me that night. Prove to me that you actually want me dead."

Ryuko's eyes flashed with anger, her free hand pushing Akio away.

Akio allowed himself to be moved, his eyes never leaving hers.

Grabbing her now free scissor blade with both hands, Ryuko raised it above her head to bring it down and slash Akio through the chest.

Akio didn't move to stop her or to dodge it.

Senketsu moved to detach himself from Akio to block it, but stopped when Akio placed his hand over the tie. In the end, the blade would never reach him, and he knew it.

Ryuko's arms shook as she held the blade above her head, her body refusing to move any further. Her scowl had returned once more, but it now looked wrong on her face. Her mouth was contorted into an angry snarl, but her eyes shone with tears of sadness and regret.

Akio smiled warmly and reached up to take her hands in his, slowly prying each of her cold fingers off of the hilt of her blade. Warmth slowly began to flood back into her hand as her fingers closed around his.

"I knew you were still in there."

Tears began to stream freely from her eyes. Her other hand let go of the scissor blade, the sword falling harmlessly to the ground.

"A-Akio...?" Ryuko mumbled, recognition slowly dawning on her.

"Ryuko," Akio smiled, reaching a hand up to brush away the tears.

The ground began to rumble, interrupting whatever moment the two might have.

Akio turned to look at the doors behind him, raising an eyebrow. Somehow they had closed again?

It was almost as if-

The doors burst open as a river of blood flowed into the room, the bright red color of the liquid contrasting heavily to the grayish environment around him. The blood rushed directly towards them, completely enveloping the two and covering them in darkness.

But before that darkness took him, the life of Ryuko Matoi flashed before his eyes. Everything from her birth, to her childhood, to her teenage years. Everything from her time with Dr. Matoi, to her time as the Guitar Case Drifter, to her time with Mako and Akio. Even the month in which the two were apart was shown to him. He felt every emotion, every cry, and every scream. He felt her hope, her sadness, and her anger.

But most of all, he felt her loneliness.

Akio's eyes fluttered open, the dim light of the room blinding him.

It only took a few hours for Akio to return to the land of the living. His body, battered and bruised but not yet broken, required its time to heal. Rather he liked it or not, it was going to force its rest on him. It took a few hours for Akio to wake up, but to him, it felt as if he had just come from that chapel. It felt instantaneous, as if he closed his eyes in the chapel, and when he opened them he was in the infirmary.

He was most definitely in an infirmary bed. If nothing else, he could tell because of its familiar feel and the familiar smell. Hospital rooms always had that smell to them. He couldn't place what it was, but he knew it when he smelled it.

Looking around the room, he noted that he was the only inhabitant for the time being. Well, that was somewhat depressing, but it wasn't like someone could be here 24/7.

Turning down at his chest, he noticed that he was shirtless, but hopefully not pantless. His chest was covered in a bandages, and on his arm he could feel the rough, scratchiness of a cast. So the doctor must have already worked on all of his injuries. That was a relief.

Right. He was stabbed. Then he... what the hell was that thing in the chapel, anyways? He just did what his heart had told him to, like it was some sort of script laid out to him. It must have been something his brain imagined as he lost consciousness. He had heard stories about how people would 'see the light' or experience out of body experiences as their brain began to shut down. That was the most logical explanation. How could he have heard Senketsu, anyways? That didn't make sense. On top of that, he was a suit in that dream, not a sailor uniform.

And yet... he could vividly remember every detail. He could remember the feel of Senketsu on him, he could remember the feel of Ryuko's hand in his, and he could remember the feel of the blood washing over him.

Akio shook his head. None of it made any sense.

"Shit," Akio cursed to himself. He had been stabbed! How could he keep forgetting this?

He gulped as he lifted the blanket that was covering him, praying to the powers that be that it wasn't too bad.

Akio's eyes widened, his jaw falling to his chest.

There was no wound. There was a scar from where it had once been, but there was no wound. He winced when he reached down to push down on it, so he wasn't imagining things. There was just simply no wound. Somehow, someway, it had been healed.

He was weak though. Incredibly so. It felt as if someone had drained him of his blood. Considering events that had transpired, that was probably the case.

"Am I still dreaming?"

"No, I can assure you that this is no dream."

Akio flinched at the unexpected voice, turning his head up to see Satsuki walk in with a cup of coffee and wearing a fancy looking black trench coat.

"Coffee?" Akio blurted out. He always thought she was strictly a tea drinker.

"I need something a little stronger than tea today," Satsuki replied as she sat down in one of the vacant chairs placed beside his bed. As she got closer, he could notice her paler looking skin, as well as the bags under her eyes. No surprise. She probably hasn't slept in over a day. She had to be running on empty by now.

"It's good to see that you are well," Satsuki commented.

"Yeah," He sighed, running a hand over his face. "Thank god."

"I imagine you're curious as to what happened," Satsuki continued as she took a sip from her mug.

"That I am," Akio nodded, his interest definitely peaked now.

"After your... confrontation with Ryuko, you and Senketsu were both sucked into the wound you had created."

"That's..." Akio mumbled, his eyes narrowing in confusion. "That's..."

"Impossible?" Satsuki finished for him. "Apparently not."

Akio shook his head. So it really did happen...

"What happened next?"

"After a few seconds, you and Senketsu reemerged from the wound, and Ryuko ripped Junketsu off of her body. From there, she reunited with Senketsu, and the two of them were able to fight off Nui Harime together, cutting her arms off in the process. After Nui escaped, Ryuko brought you here."

Akio blinked, his ears slowly processing the words. So, he was sucked into Ryuko... that was a in itself made zero sense, but it happened. He was only in there for a few seconds, which also seemed crazy. It felt like he was in that chapel for longer than that, but it's not like Satsuki would lie to him.

At least Nui had her arms chopped off. It's what that bitch got for the torture she put him and everyone else through.

"And then?"

"Then we were able to recover several bodies from their COVERS, as well as recover a vast amount of Life Fibers, including the remains of Junketsu. A vital mistake on their part to allow such a thing."

Satsuki took a sip from her coffee, leaning back in her seat as she crossed her legs.

"And that's where we are now, licking our wounds. My Elite Four are resting and the Mankanshokus are running back and forth to treat their patients. Your brother and sister were in here not too long ago, but I was able to convince them to go get something to eat."

Akio rose an eyebrow. It was great that they weren't fretting over him and were taking care of themselves, but...

"Convince them?"

Did she really do that? Did Satsuki *really* do that for him?

"Yes," Satsuki nodded, her eyes distant. "I'm sure you remember the things you asked of me during our time together in that cage."

Akio frowned, averting her eyes. After everything that had happened, he felt guilty about his treatment of her during that month.

"One thing that stuck out the most was when you asked if I felt guilty for what happened. To put it simply, yes, I do... I feel guilty for much that has happened."

Akio glanced over at her. Just from the tone alone he could tell that she meant it, and from the look in her eyes she must have been thinking about the near-death experience he had went through earlier. She probably felt responsible since she didn't make it in time to prevent Ryuko from going through with it.

Well, he was still alive, and doing fine. Mako wasn't hurt, and Ryuko was back in her right mind again. As far as Akio was concerned, it was in the past.

"Is the great Lady Satsuki apologizing to me?" Akio smirked. "Again? Wow, I'm honored."

Satsuki's calm expression turned into a glare.

"Must you say it with such sarcasm each time?"

"Better get used to it now that we're on the same team," Akio replied with a grin. His grin faltered when he realized that Satsuki had purposefully left someone out with her retelling. "I noticed you haven't mentioned Ryuko. Where is she?"

"After our... -" Satsuki pursed her lips, pausing for a brief moment to think her words over. "-Agreement to join forces, she wandered off to have some time alone with Senketsu and her thoughts."

"How is she doing?" Akio asked tentatively. He could very clearly remember his experience in that chapel, and the memories and

feelings he was shown. "You know, with everything's that's happened..."

"I believe she is still upset with how things transpired. I would imagine she feels quite guilty for how she acted when she wore Junketsu."

Akio ran a hand through his hair, wincing at the slight pain the movement caused. Well, of course she would. Hell, if she hadn't been stopped, she probably would have killed every last one of them. If one or two things had been different, that might have been what happened, too.

Sighing, Akio leaned back on the bed. It's not exactly like he could get up and go find her. And besides, it was probably best she dealt with this herself. She didn't need Akio there to hold her hand as she dealt with every single one of her problems.

"Thank you for being here with me, Satsuki," Akio said after a moment of silence.

Satsuki blinked, her lips hovering over her coffee as she stared at him.

"Of course, Akio. However, I'll have you know I haven't been the only one to visit."

Akio smiled. That was actually quite nice to hear. It was comforting knowing that even the likes of the Elite Four might start to see him as a friend. He'd like that.

"So... what now?"

"Well, there's a bit of a lull at the moment," Satsuki answered. "So we have time to catch our breaths, but I imagine it won't last long."

"What kind of time frame are you thinking?"

"Two days at the most," Satsuki shrugged. "A few hours at the least."

Akio sighed loudly. Well, that was disconcerting. He hoped it wasn't a few hours.

"Will we be ready?"

"Yes," Satsuki nodded and sipped from her coffee. "The sewing club is working tirelessly right now to construct a new batch of Goku uniforms, as well as patch together Junketsu. The rest of Nudist Beach are currently prepping for our next battle."

Satsuki paused, her eyes examining Akio closely.

"Iori has already created a newer version of your Goku uniform. If you want, I can-"

"No," Akio rose a hand to stop her. "I'm done fighting."

"You are what?" Satsuki blinked, taken back by his declaration.

"No more fighting for me," Akio repeated himself. "If I keep going down the path I'm on, there won't be much left of me, and I'm not even close to finished yet. I have a long, long list of things I want to do before I kick the bucket."

Akio turned to Satsuki, a smile tugging at his lips.

"So, I think I'll leave the heavy lifting to you and Ryuko from here on out while I assist from the sidelines."

Satsuki nodded, returning his smile, albeit very slightly.

"A wise decision, Akio. You can count on us."

His smile grew.

"I know."

The next two hours passed by in a blur. Satsuki had stayed with him for a short while before she left to go and do some administrative things. After she had left, Aikuro and Akiko had returned. He was expecting another lecture from Aikuro, but surprisingly, he didn't this time. Instead, he was just happy to see Akio safe and sound, the same as Akiko. However, Akiko's despair at seeing her big brother in this condition broke Akio's heart even further, only making him more resolved to stay out of future conflicts.

After that tearful reunion, the Elite Four had dropped by in one big group, all giving Akio their well-wishes. Hell, even Nonon. It was actually really nice. Once all of this was said and done, Akio would have to invite them out somewhere to repay them for their kindness to him and his family.

The last visitors he received were the Mankanshokus. They had fretted over him, of course. Mrs. Mankanshoku tried to force feed him croquettes, while Mako had hugged his arm the entire time, refusing to let it out of her grasp. It was funny, really. Just her presence alone gave him energy. He couldn't explain how relieved he had been to see her safe and sound.

Mr. Mankashoku was there as well, and had been able to give Akio a rundown on what was going on with him. The doctor had treated all of his previous wounds, but eerily enough his wound caused by Ryuko had healed almost completely. The sword itself had pierced through his left lung, missing his heart and spine, but still had did quite a bit of damage. If Ryuko's strike and been a few inches upwards and a few inches to the right, Akio wouldn't be here right now.

Mr. Mankanshoku was as baffled as Akio was at the fact that his wound had healed nearly completely. It would still be sore, and with a wound like this it'd be like that for a long time, but there would be no lasting damage. But to be on the safe side, the back alley doctor ordered him to stay off his feet for a few days. Stab wounds weren't exactly things to be taken light off. Akio had agreed, of course. He

had no plans on hurting himself anymore. He'd use his wheelchair, and he'd use it proudly.

There was only one possible explanation that Akio could think of as to why his wound had closed so quickly... but to be honest he himself barely believed it. He *was* in Ryuko's body, and she *did* have incredible regenerative abilities due to her condition. Could some of it have transferred over to Akio during his time in there? He obviously had no way of knowing, but it was the only thing left that made a lick of sense. Even if it made no sense itself.

Speaking of which...

Akio glanced over at the clock, letting out a soft sigh. It was getting late.

"It'll be okay, Akio," Mako grinned at him, patting his arm. "I'm sure Ryuko will come around soon."

Akio's frown deepened. Honestly, he doubted that. If he was in her shoes, he could only imagine how difficult it would be to come face to face with the man you nearly killed. But still, he only wanted to see her. It's been a month now since he had even talked to her, let alone saw her. That fiendish, Junketsu wearing monster didn't count in his mind.

He just wanted to see her, and preferably before the final fight with Ragyo happened.

"Yeah, I guess," Akio exhaled slowly, letting his head rest on the pillow behind him.

Were things really going to be alright between the two? Akio couldn't help but wonder if they wouldn't. It wasn't an easy thing getting past something like attempting to kill your partner, even if Akio didn't blame Ryuko for it. It was clear as day that it was Ragyo's fault for tampering with her mind, but Akio assumed that Ryuko wouldn't

think of it that way. She'd probably take it quite hard, and if anything blame herself for it.

Akio looked back to the clock. It was almost ten in the evening. The day was nearly over.

Mr. Mankanshoku walked over to his IV bags and fiddled with them before turning to Akio.

"Why don't we get out of your hair so you can get some rest?"

"What?" Akio's eyes widened. "N-no, you don't have to."

He protested, but the look Mako's parents were giving him was telling him that they weren't having any of it.

"You really do need your rest, sweetie," Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled at him, grabbing Mako by the arm and lifting her out of her seat. "Now more than ever."

Akio was ready to protest even more, but he could feel his eyes begin to grow heavy as if his body was trying to agree with them. While his wound had nearly healed, that didn't mean he was completely good to go. He had still lost a lot of blood, and partnered with the rest of the injuries his body had, he was completely exhausted from just sitting in a bed.

"Will you be back?" Akio mumbled sleepily, letting his head sink into the pillow.

"Of course, silly!" Mako giggled, giving him a kiss on the forehead before she skipped to the door. "We'll be back in the morning!"

The rest of the Mankanshokus nodded, each of them giving Akio a hug before they followed Mako out of the door.

Honestly, he'd rather they didn't leave, but he could feel himself getting very, very tired. He wished they had stuck around until he had fallen asleep, but that would have been selfish of him to ask.

They had to be worn out too. Just because he was in a hospital bed didn't mean he had to keep other people awake.

Akio frowned slightly before he closed his eyes to drift off to sleep. There would be no more visitors on this night.

Akio could hear a door open in his sleep. He could feel a light hit the back of his eyelids, but he only grumbled sleepily and turned his head away from the source of it. Footsteps slowly approached his bedside, only stopping to take a seat.

The room grew quiet again, the only sounds being Akio's deep breathing and the almost restrained breaths of whoever was in the room with him. It was nice. Calming even.

He was nearly content to just drift completely into the realms of sleep, but he became fast aware of two eyes watching him closely.

Akio's eyes fluttered open and he turned his head toward the unknown presence.

It should have been obvious who it was, but his still sleepy brain wasn't thinking that clearly.

"Ryuko!" Akio gasped, his eyes widening. She actually came! He felt that she would eventually, but... seeing her now was a great relief. He'd be lying if he said a part of him wasn't worried that she wouldn't show up at all. He hadn't exactly been a part of many relationships, but this sort of thing- getting stabbed and all that, seemed like it might put a wedge in it.

Ryuko replied with a mirthless smile, her eyes moving to the ground as she nodded slightly.

"Sorry it took me so long," Ryuko whispered, her eyes purposefully avoiding him now. Honestly, she was probably hoping that he would stay asleep.

"You're here now," Akio smiled. "That's all that matters."

Ryuko nodded again, her eyes still on the ground as she scooted slightly further away from him. Things were not off to a hot start.

"..."

"..."

And just like that, the two fell into an unimaginably awkward silence. The air of the room was so thick with it that Akio could probably cut it with a knife. He could basically taste it at this point.

Akio frowned. He should have known it wouldn't be that easy. But by no means was he going to sit back and let it rule them. It had been longer than a month since the two had actually talked to each other. There was no way he was just going to sit here in an awkward silence.

Propping himself up on his bed, Akio looked at Ryuko with a firm expression.

"We should talk about what happened."

Ryuko looked up at him with wide eyes, then quickly looked away again.

"Yeah."

It was definitely easier said than done, something that Akio was becoming aware of very quickly. Well, if they were going to get anywhere, they'd have to clear the air, and get past the obvious elephant in the room.

He couldn't just go out and say 'Hey, you ran me through with a sword like a shish kebab, and then I got sucked up into your body where we had a moment in a chapel.' That would most definitely not work. By no means would that work.

But they had to move past it. One thing at a time.

"I don't blame you, you know," Akio whispered.

Ryuko finally met his eyes, her own eyes a mixture of sadness and anger.

"Why?" Ryuko asked of him. "Why won't you? What I've done... it's unforgivable. You should hate me. I'd even feel better if you did."

"But I don't," Akio reassured her. "That *thing* was not you. I know that better than anyone."

"Yeah, but this would have never happened if I didn't lose my head," Ryuko mumbled. "One way or another, regardless of what you might say, it *is* my fault."

That's one thing he's come to realize about Ryuko these past months; she often beat herself up over her mistakes. More than anyone else would.

"Ryuko," Akio sighed. "Give yourself a break. If Ragyo hadn't-"

"No!" Ryuko rose her voice to interrupt him. "I won't! I betrayed you! All of you! This isn't something we can just push aside, Akio! Stop acting like it is, damn it!"

Akio blinked, slightly surprised at her outburst.

"It *isn't* okay," Ryuko huffed, turning her head away. "A simple apology won't make things better. It won't take back what I did... I almost killed you, Akio. Nothing can change that."

Akio grimaced, turning his head away. How could he have been so dense? This wasn't just something you could push under the rug and be done with it. But it was something that Akio wanted to get past. He wanted nothing more than to get back to the way things were. He missed Ryuko's company, their banter, their talks. To put it simply, he missed her.

"Fine," Akio exhaled. "Fine. You're right, what you did was wrong."

Ryuko's shoulders slumped, a sigh escaping her lips. This was the reaction she had been expecting.

"But-"

Ryuko eyes widened as she turned her head back up to Akio.

"-That doesn't mean we can't move past it. We can't just push it aside and forget about it, but we *can* keep moving forwards. Tell me, does anyone else hold what happened against you? Does anyone hate you over what happened?"

"Well," Ryuko frowned. "... No."

"Right, because they moved past it. I don't see why we can't either."

Ryuko furrowed her brow. "You... you just want to move past the fact that I nearly killed you."

Well, when she put it that way...

"Yeah. Does that make me crazy?"

"Yes."

"I guess I'm in good company, then," Akio smirked at her.

A ghost of a smile flickered across her face before it was replaced with a deep frown.

"You're sure about this? You'd really get over what happened just like that?"

"Ryuko," Akio's smirk disappeared, his voice startlingly firm. "That is exactly what I want to do."

"I just don't... Why? Why can you so easily forgive me?"

Akio pursed his lips, his expression growing more serious by the second. She seriously wanted an answer from him before she would finally let herself off the hook. He had several answers he could give her, all of them more deserving than the last. If he had to, he could probably even construct a poem on why he felt this way.

"Because I said so, that's why."

But it was always better to be blunt.

Ryuko stared long and hard at him, her eyes searching his as if to make sure he was being truthful. Slowly, a smile began to tug at her lips, reassuring Akio that he had said the right things.

"Has everyone in our group always been this stubborn?" Ryuko mused.

"If it is it's because we get it from you," Akio returned the smile.

"Hey, don't pin that crap on me."

Akio's smile grew, the heaviness in his eyes evaporating.

Scooting over some, Akio patted the area of the bed beside him.

Ryuko's eyes widened, her pupils moving from the bed, to his hand, to him, and then back to the bed again, indecision written all over her features.

"Uh, I-I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Ryuko," Akio began, his expression softening and his voice dropping. Of course they didn't have to snuggle up to each other again, but honestly, Akio could use the comfort. He could use the physical touch of another person. He was only human, after all. "After everything that's happened, I... I could really use you right now."

Ryuko blinked, a slight blush rising to her cheeks. Looking around the room to make sure that they were in fact alone, Ryuko rose from her seat and tentatively sat on the bed spread.

"There, happy now?" Ryuko grumbled, nervously fumbling with her hands in her lap. With the way she was posturing towards him, it made Akio think that she was worried she might somehow hurt him again.

"I'm getting there," Akio said as he reached out to take one of her hands in his. He wouldn't push it.

Ryuko smiled and accepted the gesture, squeezing his hand in hers.

It was nice. It felt good to just be in her presence after so long apart, and to feel her hand in his without the situation being dire.

A logical man probably wouldn't forgive someone that had tried to kill them so easily, but as time went on, Akio realized that he was not a logical man. He was anything but. Just look at his life. Barely any of it was logical, and in that moment he realized he wouldn't have it any other way. Even with all of the struggles he had gone through, he was grateful for it. Each moment, each experience, each tragedy molded him into who he was in this moment. It lead him to this moment in time.

For the first time in what felt like such a long time, Akio felt a weight leave his shoulders. From here on out, his future was going to be bright. No more fucking around. No more risking his life. He kept talking about all of the shit he wanted to do, all the promises he wanted to keep, all the people he wanted to be with, but before it had all been talk. He talked the talk, but didn't walk the walk. He still did the things he wanted to do, regardless of the consequences. Sure, in most cases they might have been the right thing, or even the sensible thing, but that didn't mean he could just go and risk his life without thinking. Had he even apologized to anyone for his recklessness? If he did, he wouldn't have meant it. That was one of

his flaws. Whenever he did something, he always believed it to be the *right* thing to do, even when people disagreed with him.

But there was one thing he had to realize, now sooner than later. You can do all the right things, do everything completely correctly without failure, and still lose. That was simply life. He had been lucky so far, but that luck would only get him so far.

How many second chances would he get? How many times would his life nearly end before he became more careful? There would only be so many times where he lucked out like he did today. If it were anyone else in any other situation, they'd be dead. He was lucky to be alive with the way he had treated his body, taking out checks that his body just couldn't cash.

Now, more than ever before, he realized that if he kept fighting the way he was fighting, even if he wanted to, it wouldn't be the right thing to do. His life meant more, especially to his loved ones. He was sure that they shared the same sentiment as he did; a victory wouldn't be a victory if someone died. Why did he think that his case was any different? They always talked about sacrifices, but it was wrong. They could win without any.

Well, he was done. He was going to survive this war, and he was going to do so by Ryuko's side. She was the ship, and he was the anchor.

And he wouldn't have it any other way.

He tugged on Ryuko's hand.

She looked at him, raising an eyebrow. So, he tugged again.

Ryuko rolled her eyes, finally allowing herself to be pulled down into the spot beside him.

"Are you always going to be this clingy?" Ryuko joked, playfully poking him in the ribs.

"I honestly don't know," Akio smiled and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer. "All of this is new to me. Can't say I dislike it, though."

"I guess it isn't *all* bad..." Ryuko smiled as she wiggled around to get comfortable.

Akio laughed, the movement causing the bed to shake lightly.

With that settled, the two laid beside each other on the bed spread, Akio's good arm around her shoulders and her head resting on his chest.

"Are you sure this is alright?" Ryuko asked as she looked up to him. "It doesn't hurt?"

"I'm fine, really," Akio replied. It was the truth, too, and he probably had her body to thank for that. But that was a conversation for another time.

Ryuko nodded, her eyes moving to the rest of his chest.

"There are an awful lot of bandages here," Ryuko noted with a frown.

"Yeah," Akio mumbled awkwardly. "Ragyo and Nui aren't exactly the nicest of hostesses."

Ryuko's frown deepened, nearly turning into a snarl at the sound of their names. That was all she needed to know.

"They'll pay for that."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Akio grinned at her. "I'm sure you'll give 'em hell."

"Damn right," Ryuko growled, one of her hands tightening around the blanket that covered Akio's waist.

"... Hey, Ryuko, can I ask you something?"

Ryuko shook her head, clearing herself of her anger and looked up to Akio.

"Yeah, what's up?"

Akio bit his lip and looked away, his words fumbling around on his tongue.

There was still one, huge elephant in the room that they had seemingly glossed over. That conversation in the chapel had been huge, at least in Akio's mind, and it had been pretty much overshadowed by the other, more depressing stuff.

How would he even go about addressing it? He had said all of that in the heat of the moment. That didn't mean he didn't mean what he had said, but it was a different ballgame when his emotions and adrenaline weren't pumping through his veins.

And who's to say she'd even say the same thing? Shit, who goes around and vows to marry someone in exchange for their return to normality? No one, that's who. No one does that. Not a single person in the history of the world had ever put forth such a proposition.

What should he even say about it? Just continue going on as if it never happened? Well, that might have been smart, but he didn't know if he really wanted to do that. Should he confront her about it? Well, that didn't seem smart at all. Maybe he should-

"Stay with me?"

Ryuko tilted her head to the side, watching him with a curious look on her face.

"Well, yeah, that's kinda why I dropped by?"

"No, that's not what I mean," Akio shook his head.

Ryuko continued to watch him, urging him to continue.

Akio swallowed his insecurities. He could either live the life he wanted, or be too much of a coward and let it slip through his fingertips. And he was no coward.

" *Stay with me,*" He repeated softly.

Ryuko's eyes widened, realization of the importance of his words slowly dawning on her.

He didn't mean just tonight. No, there was no length for his request. There was no 'just for tonight,' no 'forever.' There's no time limit for his request, just the request itself. To stay with him. Did she want that? Could she really give him that? Hours ago she had nearly killed him, and now here he was, saying these words. Could this really work out? Was this even something she wanted to pursue, after that?

Akio tried not to frown. What would she say? Did she even understand the scope of what he was asking? This wasn't a simple request. By all means, it was-

"Like you even have to ask," Ryuko scoffed and rested her head back on his chest. "Dummy."

Akio grinned and leaned down to kiss the top of her head, letting his own linger on top of it.

A lot went unsaid in their agreement, but sometimes it was best leaving those things unsaid. They didn't need everything laid out for them. Akio wouldn't tell her about how much he had wanted to see her during his time in the cage, how he had longed to hold her, longed to talk to her once more. Ryuko wouldn't mention to him her feelings of loneliness and despair when she awoke after the Grand Festival, and how she wanted him to be there with her. She wouldn't mention how she wanted to wake up and have everything go back to normal once again, with Akio watching over her as she awoke. Neither one mentioned these things.

Even when life tried to pry them apart, the two knew that they loved each other. They knew that more than anything.

In a sea of uncertainty and doubt, sometimes that's the only light you need to bring you home.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

For the first time since the night in Osaka, without accidentally letting it slip or having said it during a dire situation, the two stated their love for each other. It was said casually, with no feelings of nervousness or anxiety. It was said honestly, with no feelings of regret or worry. It was stated simply as a matter of fact.

It felt like they had been saying it all along. Maybe, in a way, they had been.

Author's Notes:

And there you have it!

Really all over the place with this chapter. Lots and lots of important stuff happens. Decisions about life, declarations of love, and beginnings of unlikely friendships. It's amazing what you realize is the most important when you nearly lose it, and with this chapter, Akio realizes that quite clearly.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter as I did! I'll be honest, on some occasions the past couple of chapters, I teared up slightly writing it. After months of writing, and way over 100000 words, it just felt great to finally write these scenes that I had planned since the beginning, and scenes that had so much emotion in them. Hopefully I conveyed them well!

Thanks for reading everyone!

Until next time!

Out of The Frying Pan, Into The Fire

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

Sorry for the long wait everyone. I had three 6-8 page papers due last week, which was a big bummer. So once I had finally finished all of that, I didn't really feel like writing any more lol. Sorry about that, but I thought I'd be honest. It was pretty hard to pump myself up to write after the three extremely boring and dry papers I had written.

But anyway, here's the next chapter! And don't worry, just because I made Akio say he was done fighting, doesn't mean he'll get his wish ;). I mentioned his Goku uniform last chapter for a reason, you know!

Speaking of which, this chapter will be pretty fast paced, as in the anime they basically get right into it, and I wanted to too. Damn it, I want to get to the cool stuff!

I'm a little rusty, but hopefully this chapter isn't too bad.

Oh, and the Easter egg! You may or may not have noticed, but in the very first scene last chapter I interspersed the lyrics to Before My Body is Dry in there! Felt like the right chapter for it, heh.

Anyhow, here's the next chapter! Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill

Three hours later...

Ryuko's head rested on Akio's chest, vacantly listening to his heart beat as she stared listlessly off into space. He had fallen asleep long ago, leaving Ryuko to her own devices. She thought about getting up and letting him sleep, but she was comfortable, and didn't want to wake him. She didn't particularly *want* to move, either. Listening to his heartbeat as he breathed in and out comforted her. It wasn't something she had ever listened to before, other than her own. It felt so... personal listening to his heartbeat now.

If anything it reassured herself of her duty. Here it was, something that Ryuko wanted to protect more than anything else, thumping right beneath her ear. Strong and healthy.

Ryuko looked up at Akio, watching him as he slept. He looked so peaceful now; not a single wrinkle of stress in his features. Just pure relaxation.

Reaching a hand up to his face, she slowly traced the three scars on his face, feeling the marred skin under her fingers. Akio always said he never liked these, but she always thought it gave him a unique quality. She would always be able to pick him out of a crowd. And she'd be lying if she said she didn't like a man with a few scars.

Ryuko sighed, letting her fingers rest on his face.

It was weird to think about everything that's happened- in fact, Ryuko tried not to. The progression of how things occurred... It hurt her head and heart to dwell too much on it. So, as Mako would tell her, she was just going to live in the moment, and enjoy the time she had. She wouldn't think about how much time they had left, either. That would just be detrimental.

After all, he asked her to stay with him, and damn it, she was gonna as long as she was able to.

Ryuko brought her hand down to his chest, slowly lifting up the blanket that covered the two of them and revealing his bare chest. It was littered with fresh scars, along with at least a dozen different

bandages that Mako's dad had put on earlier. Some of them covered his ribs, others his collar bone, and some wrapped around his arms and his back. His left arm was in a cast, and hugged closely to his collarbone.

Without thinking, she lightly lifted up one of the bandages to inspect the damage. The skin beneath the bandage was torn and ripped, as if someone had taken a cheese grater to his skin.

Akio winced in his sleep, but otherwise didn't show any other reaction.

"He sure took a beating," Senketsu noted, breaking his silence.

Ryuko exhaled slowly. "Yeah."

Senketsu's eye moved from Ryuko, to Akio, to Ryuko again, debating his next words. Should he tell her what he knew? Was it even his place, if Akio himself down played it? He didn't want to speak out of turn... but she deserved to know, at least. Or, at least part of it.

"... You should know," Senketsu began. "He harbors a great deal of anger and hatred."

Ryuko tore her eyes from Akio and looked down at her sailor uniform.

"Huh?"

"When he wore me, his blood was boiling; salty even," Senketsu explained. "He might not show it, but he's going through a great deal of inner turmoil."

Ryuko frowned and turned her head away. She didn't need him to tell her that.

"It was probably for the best we didn't synchronize fully, in fact," Senketsu added softly.

Senketsu stopped himself, not needing to continue. They both knew what he was insinuating. If the two had fully synchronized, he would have just been swallowed by Senketsu like she had not so long ago.

"Well, it shouldn't matter," Ryuko huffed. "Satsuki and I can finish things off anyway. He can just take it easy, along with everyone else."

"Hmmm," Senketsu hummed. They both had said that... but it was never that simple. "You should get some rest, Ryuko. There's no telling when we'll have to fight again."

Ryuko nodded. That was probably for the best. If she didn't get at least a little bit of rest, she wouldn't be able to function at full capacity.

"You're right. Thanks, Senketsu."

"Of course."

She brought her hand back to his chest and let her arm drape across it, allowing herself to fully sink into the comfortable position. Hugging him close like he was a teddy bear, she let out a sigh. Letting her head rest on his chest, she closed her eyes to-

The door opened.

Ryuko flinched at the creaking sound, carefully sitting up to see who the intruder was.

Her relaxed expression turned into a look of horror. It wasn't Satsuki or one of the Mankanshokus. No, it was much worse.

Aikuro strolled inside casually, walking to the bedside table and taking a seat. Instead of his nakedness that had become common the past few weeks, he wore a white lab coat over his body, thankfully hiding his more indecent parts.

Reaching over to the bedside table, Aikuro grabbed Akio's chart and gave it a brief look through.

Ryuko remained stalk still, watching Aikuro with wide eyes but not making any noises or any sudden movements.

"How's he doing?" Aikuro asked as he leaned back in his seat, crossing his legs.

Ryuko blinked at him dumbly for a few seconds, her mouth fumbling for an answer.

"Uh, h-he's doing pretty good," She replied and sat up slowly as not to wake him. "Not a lot of pain or anything."

"Good, good," Aikuro sighed, his eyes moving to his brother and lingering there.

Ryuko watched him closely, her expression dropping slightly. The two hadn't exactly talked much recently, if at all, and she could only imagine how pissed he must be at her. I mean, she nearly killed his brother. Saying it was fine was one thing, but actually meaning it was another. But then again, he certainly didn't act like he was upset with her.

"How are you feeling?" Aikuro asked as he looked back to her. "You know, with everything that's happened. Today was anything but normal."

"I'm fine," Ryuko answered firmly, her previous surprise all but gone.

Aikuro eyed her at her purposefully short answer, but didn't say anything more.

The two sat there in silence for a few moments, Ryuko watching Aikuro while Aikuro looked from Akio, to the monitor he was hooked up on, to the clipboard in his hand.

"So, what's up?" Ryuko blurted out. She'd be lying if she wasn't slightly put off by his lax behavior, given the situation.

"Oh, just checking up on you two," Aikuro shrugged and set the clipboard aside.

"How did you know we'd both be here?" Ryuko asked of him, albeit very hesitantly.

"Oh," Aikuro smirked, giving Ryuko a wink. "Just call it brotherly intuition."

Ryuko fought back the urge to roll her eyes. What a response that was.

"And that's it?" Ryuko deadpanned.

"Well, not really," Aikuro smiled apologetically and rubbed the back of his head. "We don't exactly have a lot of time..."

Ryuko nodded. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see where he was going.

"Right," Ryuko mumbled and pushed herself off of the bed. She'd rather have stayed like she was, but duty called, of course.

"Will you be alright to fight?" Aikuro asked as he stood.

"As long as I have these three, I'll be fine," Ryuko patted Senketsu's eye, letting her hand rest over it.

Aikuro rose an eyebrow, slightly caught off guard by her words.

"Three?"

"That's right," Ryuko nodded, a grin growing on her lips. "Akio and Satsuki's blood still flows through Senketsu... As long as I have Senketsu, I'll always be ready."

Senketsu closed his eye in agreement. That's right; with their combined strength, added with the blood of their comrades, they would always prove victorious.

"Very true," Aikuro returned the smile, nodding with her statement. "Then let's get going. Satsuki is waiting for us on the deck."

Aikuro gave Akio a soft pat on the foot before turning and walking out of the room, with Ryuko following close behind.

Ryuko took a deep breath as she walked, turning her head back to Akio once more before she walked out the door.

It only took one more fight and then they'd be done.

Only one more.

Akio's eyes opened, his gaze resting on the door the two had just walked through.

"They're gone," Akio whispered to himself. Good.

Taking one last glance around to make sure he was alone, Akio pushed himself off the bed, grunting at the effort. His limbs felt like jelly, but he'd have to make due. Stumbling off of the bed and into the nearby wheel chair, Akio wheeled himself to the door and out of his infirmary room.

He hadn't been lying when he had told Ryuko and Satsuki that he was done fighting... he just didn't tell them the whole truth. He was done fighting... for the most part that is.

Rolling himself down the empty hallway, he made his way around a corner, and then went down another hallway.

Coming to the door he was looking for, Akio turned the latch to it, opening it up.

"Now, where are you," Akio mumbled to himself as he glanced around the incredibly large armory.

It really was quite the sight. The storage room was a bit larger than his infirmary room, and held everything from guns and ammunition, to swords, to outfits and armor, with even a spare DTR in the corner.

Akio wheeled himself a little further into the room, letting his eyes scan the various weaponry. Now, he had never been a DTR man, so that was crossed off his list immediately. He wasn't going to use any close-quarters equipment either- no, he was looking for something a little more long range.

His eyes stopped on a silver weapon's case.

"Perfect."

Akio brought his wheelchair to the case, picking it up off the ground and letting it rest in his lap. Unclasping the case, he opened it up, his eyes brightening at the sight.

Inside sat a large black sniper rifle, no doubt the same one that Aikuro had used the day of the King of the Hill matches. The rifle came with two dozen rounds, the ammunition similar to that of the guns that Tsumugu used, but fatter. For lack of a better term, they were just thicker and larger acupunctural needles. Akio could probably pierce the tether that connected the COVERS to the Original Life Fiber with them, but they weren't exactly what he was looking for. No, he was looking for something that packed a much larger punch.

As his eyes fell onto his true purpose for coming here, Akio smiled.

Aikuro still had it after all.

He didn't know what *it* would do on someone like Ragyo or Nui, but he was excited to find out.

Boom!

The ship rocked heavily, nearly knocking him from his wheel chair.

"What the hell was that?!" Akio exclaimed, steadying himself. Something had caused the Naked Sol to rock like that. Something huge.

"Crap," Akio cursed to himself and clasped the case shut. He had less time than he thought. If that was to be any indication, the fight had already begun.

Footsteps echoed behind him, bringing him back to reality.

Akio cursed to himself again, spinning his wheelchair around to face whoever had walked in. It appeared that he had been caught red-handed. He hoped it was at least Mako. It'd be a lot easier to explain to her rather than to Ryuko or Aikuro.

But it wasn't who he was expecting in the slightest.

"Iori?" Akio gasped.

Shirou Iori, the sewing club president walked in, wheeling in a giant white dresser. Akio knew exactly what the familiar dresser meant.

"Good evening, Takahiro," Iori greeted casually as he came to a stop and looked around. "This is the armory, I take it? Lady Satsuki had a feeling I might find you here."

Akio's eyes widened. She what?

"Excuse me?" Akio muttered, his eyes moving back and forth from Iori and the dresser.

Iori ignored Akio's question, walking over to the dresser and opening it up. Inside was a familiar Goku Uniform. The zip-up jacket was black, with three golden stars studded on the shoulder. On each shoulder was a golden shoulder pad; a slight deviation from his last

uniform. And just like his past uniform, the Academy's signal was emblazoned in white along the chest. The pants, on the other hand, were nearly identical, with the only change being that the belt buckle was golden instead of silver. The outfit also came along with a pair of black gloves, with golden studs at the end of each knuckle.

"I told her I was done fighting," Akio shook his head. "I don't want this."

"Right, and she agrees with the sentiment," Iori nodded, taking out the outfit from the case. "But dire circumstances call for dire actions. We need every man we can get."

"Dire circumstances?" Akio tilted his head to the side.

"Yes," Iori replied, dusting off the uniform and examining it critically. "A giant COVER, easily a few stories tall, has appeared broadside. It is most assuredly designed for combat, and as of now the only uniform we have readily available is Mankanshoku's."

Akio's eyes widened, his hands tightening around the case in his lap.

"Why do you only have ours done?" Akio asked, trying to keep his anger and surprise down.

"Our top priority is to bolster our forces. Mankanshoku has the greatest disparity in combat strength in and out of a Goku uniform, while yours was the easiest to make, as it is only a MKII."

"But still," Akio frowned. "I told her I didn't-"

"Look, would you rather be a hypocrite, or would you rather help your friends and family fight for their lives?" Iori interrupted, fairly uncharacteristic for the boy. "We don't really have time to discuss this, and we need all the help we can get top side. Who knows how long Mankanshoku can hold off by herself."

Akio hesitated at that, indecision written all over his face.

"If Lady Satsuki didn't have the utmost confidence in you two, I wouldn't even be here right now," Iori continued, putting the final nail in the coffin.

Akio sighed. Maybe his wish to be more careful had been too ambitious at this time. And he didn't want Mako being the only one...

"Fine," Akio grunted as he stood carefully from his wheelchair. He did make sure to keep a tight grip on the rifle case, however. He would still find a use for it. "I'll take it, but I will only use it if I absolutely have to, alright?"

"As expected," Iori nodded and handed him the outfit. "Just be careful of your wounds if you do. The armor should protect you from any blow, but if you're too strenuous you'll hurt yourself again."

"Yeah, yeah," Akio grumbled and took the outfit from him. "I know."

Me and my big mouth.

"It was ignorant to promise such a thing to begin with," Iori smirked at him, patting him on the shoulder.

Akio rolled his eyes. Now the man that he had once fought with was giving him life lessons. He didn't need him to point out the obvious.

"Anything else I should know?"

"Yes," Iori said and adjusted his glasses. "There will be quite a few things different than your last uniform... -"

Akio nodded, taking Iori's words in. At least one thing he had said earlier would still hold true.

Ryuko was the ship, and he'd be the anchor.

Akio walked on to the ship deck alone, decked out in his new Goku uniform. It was sort of tight on him, but otherwise there was no real

difference than the last one he had.

The first sight that greeted him as he walked was the humongous COVER that was blocking the ship's path. Akio gaped at the giant, the color draining from his face. Jesus... it was huge! And it looked to be housing other, smaller COVERS as well. Great.

Akio grit his teeth, his hand hesitating at the zipper of his jacket but stopping.

Only if I absolutely have to, Akio reminded himself as he continued to walk. *Only if I have to*.

Standing on the ship's bridge was Gamagoori, Uzu, and Nonon, all of them watching with pensive expressions on their faces as Mako dealt with the near hundred COVERS that flooded the ship deck. From the way they were twitching, they no doubt wanted to get in on the action.

Aikuro stood at the ship's helm, doing his best to keep the Naked Sol afloat and out of harm's way from the COVERS' attack.

Neither group seemed to notice him.

Akio sighed, his eyes moving to the sky above. There, flying several hundred feet away in the night sky, was the Original Life Fiber. The orange vessel was huge, floating above them all. If Akio was a betting man, he'd wager that Ryuko and Satsuki were already fighting Ragyo. In fact, if he squinted his eyes, he could see two flashes of light flying around the sky, attacking the Original Life Fiber like mosquitoes.

First things first. They had to clear the deck.

Pulling out the rifle, Akio brought the scope to his eye, testing out the sight to make sure everything was functioning all right; and it was, no adjustment needed there. With that cleared up, he grabbed the rifle's stand and closed the case.

Letting the rifle rest on his shoulder, Akio walked off to the side and away from the three Elite Four. He didn't exactly need them breaking his concentration.

Dropping the case on the ground and laying down himself, Akio set the rifle's stand up and let the barrel set on it so it would be supported. Adjusting himself and the rifle, Akio got himself comfortable and turned the safety off.

He wasn't as good of a shot as Tsumugu, but he could get by. It was a common practice for every Nudist Beach operative to test their aim, and Akio was no exception. Back before his days of undercover work, he had spent many a hour in the shooting range.

Without looking, Akio opened up the case and pulled out a shell, placing it in the chamber.

Before anything, he had to help Tsumugu assist Mako. Mako was essentially their only hope until either Ryuko and Satsuki won, or until Iori was done with the other uniforms. Her success was crucial, and Akio would make sure of it.

Mako herself was down on the deck, surrounded by a dozen COVERS, but to her credit she was holding them off thanks to her Two Star uniform, the old Fight Club outfit. However, the super-powered clothing would only get her so far. And even worse, each COVER was a fully realized one, so none of them had tethers. They were all drawing their energy from the human being they were absorbing, without the need to be attached to the Original Life Fiber.

A COVER made for Mako's blind side, threatening to incapacitate her.

Akio took a deep breath and put his finger on the trigger, making sure the scope's crosshairs was centered on the upper back of the COVER.

Exhaling, Akio pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out loudly, causing everyone on the deck to look his way.

The thick needle tore through the air, barreling into the COVER's back. The impact caused the COVER to stumble and seize up, giving Mako just the time she needed to take care of it.

Mako spun on her heel, and with a quick strike she took care of the COVER, destroying it and letting the human that was inside of it out.

"Thanks!" Mako called out and waved to the bridge before turning on her heel and running off to engage another group of COVERS.

Akio sighed and shook his head, cocking his rifle and letting out the empty shell. Placing another in, he took sight on the next group of COVERS that Mako had run to.

He continued to fire off shot after shot, protecting Mako's blind spots where Tsumugu had failed. Put in the shell, take aim, fire, then load another round. It wasn't a hard job, as the COVERS didn't exactly try very hard to evade the fire. They were like machines, with their only goal being to eradicate human life, or to suck it dry. They swarmed to Mako and Tsumugu like moths to a flame, not even thinking twice about the fire Akio was slowly raining down on them. It was quite beneficial to him, as Akio was always a mediocre shot. But a mediocre shot was better than nothing.

As Mako took down another one, Akio loaded another shell into the chamber, this time turning his crosshairs towards Tsumugu, where a COVER was stalking up behind him.

Going through the same motion as earlier, Akio inhaled as he took aim. It was a common shooting technique. You breathe in and hold your breath as you aim. As you pull the trigger, you exhale. It's supposed to help you keep still as you line up your shot, hence giving you better aim. Akio didn't know if that was the case, but it certainly felt that way.

Exhaling, Akio pulled the trigger.

Just like before, the bullet tore through the air towards its target.

However, unlike last time, the COVER moved to the side and the bullet passed harmlessly by it. It happened in the flash of an eye, leaving Akio no way to warn Tsumugu or stop the COVER.

The COVER raised its arm, knocking Tsumugu and his DTR aside.

"Damn it!" Akio cursed to himself as he cleared the chamber, grabbing another shell to ready his next shot.

"AIEEEE!"

Mako's scream tore through the air, making Akio's blood run cold. Turning his head to his left, he saw Mako get knocked aside by a COVER, as another one made its way towards her. She wouldn't be able to protect herself or avoid the COVER, as it was essentially on top of her at this point.

"Sorry, Tsumugu," Akio mumbled to himself as he put another shell in the chamber, taking aim and pulling the trigger.

Even though it was a hurried shot, the needle struck home, punching through the COVER's shoulder and making it stumble during its attack on Mako.

Akio sighed in relief, as Mako was able to hop back up and retreat to safety. And given the gunfire in the distance, he could only assume that Tsumugu was okay as well.

His feeling of relief was short lived, as another wave of COVERS took the deck.

With ever steady hands, Akio loaded another shell into the chamber.

Mako huffed as she watched another three COVERS make their way towards her. She could feel her energy run thin, despite the numerous amounts of her mother's croquettes she had eaten. There was just no end to them, and it had been like this for the past hour. For each COVER Mako took down, another three took its place. They were saving dozens of people in the process, but it was just too much. Even with Akio and Tsumugu providing assistance, she didn't know how much more she had left in her.

She brought a hand up to her mouth, wiping away the tiny bit of sweat and blood from the side of her mouth.

Shaking the tiredness from her head, Mako popped her neck. This was no time to be an under-achiever! She would be an over-achiever!

"HYAAAAH!"

Mako let out a war cry as she ran forwards, doing her best to let out her inner Ryuko. If this was Ryuko here, she would have kept fighting no matter how tired she was. Ryuko would fight until she was beaten, or until she had won. And Mako was going to do the exact same, no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

"HAAAH!"

Mako shouted as she swung her fist, the strike tearing through a COVER and freeing the human prisoner inside.

She had to protect this ship! Ryuko had told her so! Even if she hadn't said it in words, she knew that her sister wanted that more than anything. She had to do this! Mako Mankanshoku couldn't be beaten here! She was going to make Ryuko proud! If Ryuko could be so strong, then damn it, why couldn't she?!

Jumping into the air, Mako spun in a circle to perform a roundhouse kick, her foot connecting with two COVERS before she landed,

destroying each of them. That move she had learned from watching Akio himself!

As Mako ran to the next set of COVERS, she thought about her other friend. Even in the face of sure defeat, Akio would fight. He took the situation he was given, and he either made it work or he'd die trying. He didn't bow down to Uzu when they fought, nor did he bow down to Lady Satsuki. He kept fighting until the very end. She would make him proud, too!

If Mako could capture Ryuko's strength and Akio's tenacity, she was sure to win!

Holding her friends close to her heart, Mako charged at the next group of COVERS, readying her tired limbs for another fight.

She couldn't give in yet!

Raising her fist, she swung clean through the first COVER.

Hearing the firing of a rifle in the distance, she turned around to face the COVER that Akio had shot, finishing the job for him. The two COVERS at her blindside were taken care of by Tsumugu, giving Mako a little room to breathe as she took on another two in front of her.

If they kept up this routine, they could-!

The ship shook as half a dozen orange missiles collided into the hull, rocking the boat back and forth. Mako gasped at the sight, feeling weak in the knees. She knew that they were no missiles intended to damage the ship, but that they were actually carriers directly from the Original Life Fiber. Even *she* knew that.

The missiles unraveled, and another hundred COVERS poured out of them like ants.

There... there were so many...

Tsumugu came to a stop beside her, a grave expression on his face as he watched the COVERS idle towards them.

"You should leave, Mankanshoku," Tsumugu said, keeping his eyes on the enemy.

"W-what?" Mako blubbered, looking up at the man in his DTR.

"Take a breather, I'll handle things from here."

"What?! No!" Mako shook her head, even though her body cried at her to take him up on that. "I won't give up now!"

"This isn't about giving up," Tsumugu growled and glanced at her. "This is about surviving!"

Mako's eyes widened, her words fumbling on her tongue. The way he said it... Everyone always seemed to think that Tsumugu was this mean, cold man, but here he was, offering her something like this. But she couldn't take him up on his offer. No, she would channel her inner Ryuko and Akio, and keep fighting until they won!

She shook her head, her purpose clear once more.

"Spare me your opinions," Mako replied stoically as she ran off to meet the COVERS in battle.

"Mankanshoku!" Tsumugu called after her before he too followed. "Damn, stubborn girl..."

Mako ran forwards, her limbs shaking from the exertion she had been putting on them. She stumbled slightly, but stopped her fall with an arm and pushed herself back up as she ran.

"Dumb legs," Mako panted as she ran. "Don't give up on me-!"

An arm appeared in front of her, cutting her off before reaching the COVERS.

"That's enough, Mako."

Mako gasped, her eyes traveling up the arm and to its owner.

Akio stood beside her, his arm blocking her path. There were bags under his eyes, and his face looked pale, but his eyes told another story. His green eyes shone with energy and purpose. A fire was lit in them.

He wore a familiar looking black zip-up jacket, with a pair of black slacks to match.

"Akio!" Mako exclaimed, her eyes immediately falling to the three stars on his Goku uniform. "What are you doing here?!"

"Giving you a break, of course," Akio smirked and stepped in front of her. "I can take it from here."

Mako frowned at the implication, but the way he had said it with such casual confidence... It was somewhat unlike him to be so cocky.

"No, no, no," Mako shook her head fervently. "No, no, no! You all of people can't be fighting like this!"

"It'll be fine," Akio waved her off, although he himself felt slightly unsure as well. "It's only ten minutes until the Elite Four uniforms arrive. I think I can hold off till then."

"But-"

"Mako," Akio turned to look at her, his smirk gone. "I'm serious. Get back."

And with that, Akio tugged upwards on the zipper of his jacket, activating his Goku uniform.

"Three Star Goku Uniform: Unlimited Regalia MKII!"

Closing his eyes, Akio raised his head as the straps of cloth that made up his uniform began to swirl around him, slowly enveloping his body in a tornado of black and traces of gold. Three white stars circled around him on the outside of the vortex, the three connected by a single, thin, golden line. An incredible wave of heat washed across his body as the clothing collapsed back on to him, encasing him in the familiar black armor.

However, unlike last time, no bandolier nor any ammo pouches appeared on his body. Nor did his wrist blades lock into place.

The cloth that would normally become the bandolier snaked down his arms to the palms of his hands, expanding and solidifying to form a staff. The cloth that normally became his ammo pouches traveled up his body and down his arms, pooling at the ends of the staff and hardening into blades.

When the transformation was completed, Akio was left holding a naginata- a polearm with a blade tip at the end. However, unlike the weapon of the Japanese samurai, Akio's had a blade tip at each of the ends, instead of just one.

With the armor hugging tightly to his skin, Akio felt unimaginable energy race through his blood stream, clearing his tired brain and breathing life into his sore limbs. He stood a little straighter, his shoulders a little broader as he swung his staff around, testing its weight.

"Incredible," Akio breathed, twirling the staff with ease. He didn't know how Iori did it, or what the hell he put in these uniforms, but he was able to handle it with ease, as if the weapon had always belonged in his hands.

Akio shook his head. Now was no time to be blown away by Iori's handiwork, nor the power of Life Fibers.

"Like I said," Akio turned to Mako, his voice altered due to his helmet. "I'll handle things from here."

Twirling the staff around his body, Akio let the staff rest against his back and sprinted forwards to meet the COVERS in battle.

But, before Akio could even reach them, a harpoon collided into the hull of the Naked Sol. Just from the glowing orange color, he knew where it had come from.

He gritted his teeth, his eyes moving to the Original Life Fiber. With its fang sunk into the Naked Sol, it'd just pull itself to it.

"It's coming right for us..." Akio frowned, realization dawning on him. It was going to swallow them whole!

As if to prove his point, hundreds of small explosions littered the surface of the Original Life Fiber. They were-!

Oh god.

"FIRE, FIRE, FIRE!" Akio screamed frantically as he turned back to Aikuro at his perch on the helm.

"NUDIST CANNONS FIRE!" Aikuro shouted without hesitation.

The cannons that lined the back of the ship fired a salvo of missiles, the Sol's salvo intercepting the Original Life Fiber's in midair and causing a cascade of explosions to light up the sky. Thank god the barrage didn't reach them. An attack like that might destroy the ship.

"AKIO, LOOK OUT!" Mako screamed

Akio turned his head away from the spectacle, just in time to catch sight of the dozen COVERS coming right for him.

Clicking his tongue, Akio twirled his staff and cut through the arm of the first one like butter. The COVER exploded into a cloud of dust, and the person inside fell out and to the ground.

"Mako! Tsumugu!"

"On it!" The two cried in unison, coming to rescue the incapacitated stranger.

Akio kept moving, not letting himself get distracted by the two behind him.

Twirling the staff above his head, Akio swung it downwards, cutting through the chest of the next one.

Moving briskly past it, Akio lunged forwards, stabbing through the heart of another COVER.

With three already gone, he had a long way to go. A group of five COVERS jumped into the air, all of them pouncing towards Akio.

Akio twirled his staff in a figure eight, the rapid spinning blades cutting through the air and through the COVERS that had jumped him.

With those five meeting their timely deaths, another ten COVERS took their place.

Akio continued to move forwards, his staff twirling around his body, occasionally shooting out and cutting through the chest of a COVER.

While this was going on, another, more dangerous fight was going on in the skies above.

Ryuko and Satsuki tore through the air towards Ragyo, each time their attacks getting swatted away like flies.

The two sisters continued their aerial assault regardless, even if Ragyo blocked each attack effortlessly.

Ryuko grunted in anger, bringing herself back around for another run at Ragyo.

Increasing her speed in her thrusters, her pace quickened, sending her barreling directly towards her 'mother.'

Ragyo smirked and allowed Ryuko to approach, not even moving to try guard it.

"AHHHH!" Ryuko shouted as she rose her two scissor blades to strike.

Ragyo blocked the strike easily with her Life Fiber Sword, then sent Ryuko flying away with a knee to her gut.

Hoping to catch her with her guard down, Satsuki attacked from Ragyo's other side, but that too proved useless. Ragyo repelled it as well, as if it were nothing at all, then replied with a strike of her own.

The two girls flipped through the air, eventually coming to a stop several dozen feet away from Ragyo, each of them gasping for air.

"She's tough," Ryuko gasped.

"Yes, but not unbeatable," Senketsu replied.

Ryuko nodded, preparing herself for another attack when Ragyo began to speak.

"Honestly, you girls are so thick-skulled," Ragyo sighed, her voice projecting across the space between them easily. "No matter how much they struggle, humanity is merely a creature meant to submit to Life Fibers."

"No," Ryuko shook her head, her anger building in her chest as the faces of her loved ones appeared in her mind. "The hell they are!"

Ragyo snorted. "Life Fibers spurred on the evolution of this world's sentient life. Clothing transformed beasts into humans. Just as humans raise livestock, you see."

"Livestock?!"

"Just as humans eat their livestock, so will Life Fibers feed on humanity. Is that not appropriate for the beings who occupy the top of this world's food chain?"

"But that does not mean we must meekly obey!" Satsuki objected. "Humans have a will to live!"

The two flew at Ragyo, swinging their blades at her neck, only for them both to be blocked by Ragyo's Life Fiber Swords.

"You impudent pigs in human clothing," Ragyo cackled. "That will to survive will disappear soon enough."

Ragyo knocked both of them away and flew back to the Original Life Fiber, placing herself atop of it.

"Your last bastion is almost within reach!" Ragyo laughed, motioning to the world around her with her hands.

"This is bad, Ryuko!" Senketsu said to her. "The ship, it's-"

"I know," Ryuko hissed.

She had to do something soon, or else... or else the Original Life Fiber would swallow the Naked Sol and everyone with it.

"Satsuki!"

Akio danced around the deck, leaving clouds of dust and cloth scraps in his wake. His staff twirled all around his body, cutting and slicing through the cloth of any COVER within its range.

He stepped gracefully, ducking and weaving through attacks as he dealt out his own. Iori must have known that Akio's dancing background would come in handy somehow. Even with his sometime clumsy or weak strikes, Akio's footwork made up for it. It seemed that his years of dancing was nothing to scoff at anymore.

The moonlight gleamed off of the blades of Akio's staff as it cut through the air. The blades whistled as they sliced the air.

Akio panted, his strikes beginning to slow. His handiwork had been impressive, but his stamina was another story altogether. It had only been maybe seven minutes, and he could already feel his strength evaporating.

They were endless. Akio lost count at forty-three. At this point, Mako and Tsumugu had had to reenter the fray, as even though he was trying his best, Akio could only do so much. This is what Mako must have felt earlier.

"Akio, on your left!"

Down!

Akio dropped to the floor, avoiding the clumsy swing of a COVER.

As he bounced back to his feet, he cut through the COVER's waist, chopping it in two and destroying it.

Akio gasped for air, steadying himself as another ten COVERS charged him.

"I guess there's nothing for it," Akio mumbled to himself as he charged forwards.

As he ran forwards, he changed his grip on his staff and threw it like a spear. It pierced through the first two COVERS in the line, the staff embodying itself in their fabric bodies and skewering them.

Running forwards, he grabbed the staff and yanked it out of the COVERS' chests as they exploded into a cloud of fabric, then swung it in a wide circle and cut through another three.

"Look out!" Mako cried to him.

Akio flinched, turning to his left to see a COVER swinging at him.

Shit!

He moved to block the blow, but before the COVER could complete the strike, four white dressers slammed to the ground in front of him.

Akio gasped at the sight as Mako came up next to him, she herself gaping at the Elite Four and their new uniforms.

"Don't overdo it, Mankanshoku," Gamagoori warned.

"For an underachiever and some washed up trash, I'll give you both an A for effort," Nonon smiled at them.

"But from here on out, it's our job," Uzu continued.

"So, shall we unveil Iori's final Goku Uniforms?" Inumuta smirked as he fixed his glasses.

Akio shook his head and laughed, deactivating his own uniform in the process. The Elite Four sure did like their over-the-top entrances. Other than that, they sure knew when to make their appearance. Honestly, Akio didn't know how much more he had in him.

Even with their flashy entrance, it was welcomed nonetheless.

"I suppose I'll let you take it from here," Akio chuckled and turned to Mako. "Right, Mako?"

Except Mako didn't say anything. She wasn't even looking at the Elite Four. What was she looking at?

"Mako?" Akio repeated himself, worry beginning to etch into his features. "What's-"

"RYUKO!" She cried out, fear written all over her face.

Akio's face fell, his head immediately turning to the sky where he had last seen them last.

While they had been fighting, the Original Life Fiber had pulled itself a few hundred feet closer, the sight growing larger by the second. And there, at the very top stood Ragyo, with her Life Fiber Blades embedded in Ryuko's stomach.

With a slight push of her arms, Ragyo cut Ryuko in half.

Akio's heart stopped as he watched the two bloody halves of Ryuko's body plummet to the water below. Lifeless. Dead.

"No, no, no..."

She was... dead? That's it? Just like that? The girl he loved... she was dead?

He could hardly think straight, let alone breathe. It was as if time had slowed to a standstill, not a single soul moving as they watched Ryuko's body plummet to the ground.

His heart thumped loudly in his chest. With each thump, it began to chip away, slowly breaking.

But he had to do something. Something, anything.

"No, no, no," Akio mumbled, his knees nearly giving out on him before anger took over. " **No, no, no.** "

"CLEAR THE DECK!" Akio shouted to the Elite Four. "AND THEN GO AFTER THEM! DOUBLE TIME!"

The Elite Four nodded, jumping off of their dressers and transforming.

Akio turned and walked away, not even bothering to watch or to take Mako with him. No, he had another objective in mind.

No, it was not over yet. *It was not over.* As God as his witness, it would not end this way. If this were a novel, Akio might have had a few pages worth of time to think about Ryuko and their time together,

and then another few more pages about what their future would have been like.

But this wasn't a story. No, it was real life, and he had to act.

Blood for blood. Eye for an eye. Ragyo was going to get hers, here and now.

Explosions rocked the air around him as he walked, the sounds of battle already raging. The Elite Four were doing their parts, and soon so would Akio. He cursed himself that he didn't act sooner, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

His walk turned into a run as his thoughts remained the same. All he could picture was Ryuko's cut-in-half body as it fell to the water.

Akio shook his head as he ran up the stairs to the bridge. No, she wasn't dead. He wouldn't allow himself to think that way. She wasn't dead.

"She's still alive, she's still alive, she's still alive," Akio's voice cracked as he walked onto the bridge, his eyes scanning for where he left his rifle last.

Spotting it across the way, he sprinted over to it and picked it up.

"Akio, what are you doing?" Tsumugu asked, who had followed him to the deck with Mako right on his tail.

Akio shook his head, opening the case and pulling out a glowing red bullet.

"That's..." Tsumugu's eyes widened.

"The S.A.B," Akio finished for him as he loaded the shell into chamber. "Otherwise known as the Special Adhesive Bullet, used to render any Life Fiber infused clothing useless."

Akio cocked the rifle.

"I'm going to kill her."

Author's Notes:

And there you have it! Like I said, Akio isn't just dead in the water! He's still got some fight left in him!

Seriously, did the S.A.B. just fade into nothingness after the episode it was mentioned in? I mean, I don't know about anyone else, but I'd be curious as to how it would affect a Life Fiber infused HUMAN. I mean, in the show they said it would kill not only the Life Fiber clothing, but most likely the wearer as well. Even if it's Ragyo and Nui, who are humans infused with Life Fibers, don't you think it'd be cool to see what would happen?

Well, I guess we'll find out next chapter! Hopefully the wait won't be as long!

Thanks for reading everyone, and until next time!

Beginning of the End

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of Before My Body is Dry!

We're getting so close to the end, but we're not there yet! This chapter will be the very last chapter before the big bad fight with Ragyo and Nui. Yeah, I decided to break the last bit into two chapters, as it read better that way I felt. It woulda been a bit too long otherwise, and this way I get to give you guys another chapter quicker.

After this chapter, we've got the final fight, and then the OVA, and then we'll be done with the canon story of KKK! Then we get into the stuff I have planned after! Yay!

Anyhow, I don't have much to say this time around, so let's get started!

Read, relax, and enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Akio stepped forwards, dropping to one knee and bringing the scope to his eye.

"Do you need a spotter?" Tsumgu asked as he stepped beside him.

"No," Akio shook his head. "At this range I should be fine."

Taking aim, Akio brought the crosshairs to Ragyo's head and allowed himself a brief moment to evaluate the situation.

The Elite Four, having finished their clean up of the deck, had taken to the skies and off towards the Original Life Fiber. Ragyo herself was standing tall at the front of the giant orange vessel, her blades locked with Satsuki. His heart skipped a beat when there was still no sign of Ryuko, but he tried to push it out of his head.

Taking into account the distance as well as the wind, Akio brought the crosshairs a couple inches up and to the right. He was going for the head.

His finger hesitated on the trigger, doubt beginning to flood his mind. What if he missed? What if he missed and hit Satsuki instead?

"You should wait for a better shot," Tsumugu advised.

Akio bit his lip, but that would be for the best. He couldn't take the shot with Satsuki so close.

But for each second he waited, the situation grew worse. Having disarmed Satsuki, Ragyo lashed out and grabbed her daughter by her face.

Akio's trigger finger twitched.

"Don't," Tsumugu warned.

Akio took a deep breath. He was right. He couldn't yet.

Keeping his eyes trained on Ragyo, he had to wait until the opportunity presented itself.

"Akio?"

Akio nodded, not daring to turn his eyes away from Ragyo.

"What, Mako?"

"Um..." He could hear Mako hesitate with her words beside him.

"Um... shouldn't we think about this first?"

"... What?"

"I, uh, I mean... is killing her the right thing to do?"

Akio's eyes widened, not expecting such a question.

"Um... it's just... killing someone is always bad," Mako continued quietly.

Akio grounded his teeth, his resolve chipping slightly. Of course Mako had to be the voice of reason. Her innocence was making Akio question his decision, ever so slightly.

As she talked, Satsuki must have said something to make Ragyo turn her head and to toss Satsuki aside. Several feet behind where they stood, Ryuko flew into the air beside Original Life Fiber. Her body was still intact, not even a hint of her previous injury on her body. She was still alive!

Akio removed his eye from the scope, blinking dumbly at the sight before him. She... she was alive! But... how? He saw her get chopped in half. No amount of Life Fibers could fix that... or so he thought?

"Take the shot, Akio," Tsumgu said.

"Akio..." Mako mumbled.

No, it didn't matter how. She was alive, and that was all that mattered. Ragyo hadn't killed her. Ryuko... she must have wanted it to seem like she was dead, so that she could go after the Original Life Fiber. It was a good idea, but...

Well, damn it! She scared him shitless!

"Akio! Now!"

Akio flinched, hurriedly bringing the scope back to his eye.

If there was any better time to take the shot, this would be it. Ragyo was distracted, Satsuki was out of harm's way, and hell, even Ryuko was still alive.

But his finger hesitated, remembering the countless times he had had such a dilemma in the past. Was he a killer? Even if it was someone as terrible as Ragyo? Murder was still murder, even if it was for the greater good. Mako was right in that account. Did Ragyo deserve to be put to death? Who was he to-?

"No. She deserves to die."

Exhaling, he pulled the trigger.

Minutes earlier...

"DAMN YOU, RAGYO!"

Satsuki attacked Ragyo with intent to kill, her blades aimed directly for her throat.

Ragyo closed her eyes and chuckled quietly, raising her blade to block Satsuki effortlessly.

"You waste your time," Ragyo stated. "It was only because Ryuko was fused with Life Fibers that you could stand against me, however slightly. You, in that makeshift Kamui, cannot so much as slow me down."

Satsuki growled, knowing full well that Ragyo spoke the truth.

With a flick of her wrist, Ragyo disarmed Satsuki and knocked her back. But before Satsuki could hit the ground, Ragyo reached out and grabbed her by her face.

Lifting her daughter into the air, Ragyo's hand squeezed around Satsuki's face. Satsuki struggled against the grip, but it was useless.

"Poor girl, who doesn't even know her own limitations... All you can do is go keep your little sister from being lonely. The one who is on her way to hell."

"I admit it, perhaps I am a sham..." Satsuki growled into Ragyo's palm. "But it is you who will suffer for underestimating this sham!"

"How pathetic," Ragyo's eyes narrowed, her grip tightening. "What could you possibly do now?"

Satsuki grinned. "I can buy time."

"Buy time...?"

Several feet behind them, a red light jumped into the sky.

Ragyo gasped. "Ryuko!"

Hovering high above the Original Life Fiber, Ryuko prepared her approach.

"Shippu Senjin!"

Blades grew from every inch of Senketsu's cloth, each one sharper than the next.

Angling herself towards the orange vessel, Ryuko flew directly at it.

"No!"

Ragyo tossed Satsuki aside, making her move towards Ryuko to stop her.

She could still-!

A shot rang out in the distance, shattering the fragile silence of the night.

Before she could even turn her head to the sound, the bullet hit her.

It happened in an instant. If Satsuki had blinked, she would have missed it.

Blood exploded from Ragyo's head, her body falling to the Original Life Fiber and bouncing across the surface like a ragdoll.

"What?!" Satsuki gasped, her head turning to the ship down below. There, off in the distance, she could see Akio on the bridge, rifle in hand. Akio?! Just how the hell did he-

Ragyo's screams of agony brought her back to reality.

She was rolling across the Life Fiber surface, her hands clutching at her skull, screams of pain coming from her mouth.

"GAHHH!"

Ragyo screeched like a dying animal, more blood pouring from her fatal head wound.

Satsuki took a few steps towards her, her eyes widening at the sight. How could such a thing be possible?

As she got closer, it became a little clearer.

There, in the center of her forehead, was a hole the size of a golf ball, going clear out the other side. Satsuki could see the inner sewing of Life Fibers inside her mother's skull, but instead of stitching back together like she expecting, the red strings only twitched helplessly. Smoke began to hiss from the torn ends of the strings, as if they were beginning to burn away at themselves. A few of the red strings began to turn to a gray, dead looking color, before they evaporated into a puff of dust.

"GAAAAAAH! WHY?! WHY DOES IT HURT?!"

Ragyo brought her head back, letting out another roar of pain. The blood that gushed from her wound had matted her once white and rainbow colored hair to her head, as well as stain the whites of her

eyes and the white of her teeth. Her once white and 'pure' look was now tainted by a sickly red. Everything from her hair to her white dress.

She tried to pick herself off the ground, but only made it to her hands and knees before she stumbled and vomited. Satsuki didn't know it was possible for her to do such a thing.

Ragyo looked around frantically, the blood and bile dripping down her face. Her body began to convulse, her limbs trembling as she began to pale even further than her normal skin tone.

"WHO DID THIS TO ME?! I'LL KILL THEM! I'LL TEAR THEM APART UNTILL THEIR BLOOD STAINS THE EARTH!"

Her angry and pain filled shouts were interrupted by another bout of vomiting.

The Elite Four came to a stop beside the dumbstruck Satsuki, the four of them as equally surprised by the turn of events.

"What happened?" Gamagoori was the first to speak.

"I..." Satsuki paused, her eyes still on her mother. "I don't know..."

Ragyo's crazed eyes met her daughter's, sending shivers down Satsuki's spine. There was almost no sanity left in them. She had never seen so much emotion from her mother before. It was almost too surreal to believe.

She had seen many, many sides to her mother, but none like this one.

"YOU WILL ALL PAY! ALL OF YOU! THE LIFE FIBERS WILL DRAIN YOU UNTIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT!"

The orange Life Fibers of the Original Life Fiber expanded upwards, covering Ragyo and encasing her in the familiar form of a Life Fiber missile.

Before anyone could hope to stop her, the missile launched from the vessel, flying directly towards the tower of Honnouji Academy.

"Did... did we do it?" Uzu breathed, untying the bandana around his head to reveal his green eyes.

"I... I don't know," Inumuta mumbling, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "But why would she leave the Original Life Fiber like this?"

"Her life was in danger," Satsuki muttered, her head moving back to the boat below. "If she had stayed, she would have died with the ship."

... How?

Akio rose to his full height, his face expressionless as he dropped the rifle down to the ground beside him. He knew he had hit. Even from this distance he could hear the screams of Ragyo.

It was done. He did it, with no feelings of remorse. His shot had punched clean through the center of her skull, like a knife through hot butter. Akio had killed Ragyo.

... Or so he thought.

Tsumugu placed a hand on his shoulder, giving him a soft squeeze. He didn't say anything, but he gave Akio a nod of approval. Akio returned the nod. It was what had to be done, plain and simple. Tsumugu was a man of action just like he was, and for once, the two were in agreement. Ragyo needed killing, and someone did it.

Mako, on the other hand, didn't say or do anything other than cover her ears with her hands to ward off the sound of the screams. She shook her head softly, doing her best to try and ignore them.

Akio reached out to touch her, but stopped and retracted his hand. He held no feelings of regret for his actions, so any apology for it

would be half-assed. It'd be forced, and Akio wouldn't do that to her. He could only apologize for the discomfort it caused, not for the action itself.

His hand fell back to his side.

He would never tell anyone this, but he was actually glad once all was said and done. Ragyo was a vile bitch, and he was happy that it was him that pulled the trigger. A sane man might question their actions in this situation. After all, taking someone's life wasn't exactly an everyday event. But, looking back on it all, maybe Akio wasn't the most sane man in the world.

In fact, if he was being honest with himself, he was proud of what he did. He only hoped that Ragyo got to feel the pain of it all. He hoped she felt helpless, as if the rising tide was slowly taking her under as she faded, leaving her breathless, gasping for air. He wished that.

"CLEAR THE DECK!" Aikuro's voice rang out, breaking Akio from his dark thoughts.

Akio and Tsumugu both perked their heads up, turning towards Aikuro at the helm.

"Is he-?"

"Don't tell me you're-"

"Oh, but I am!" Aikuro shouted back. "The last ace up the Naked Sol's sleeve... Great Naked Dagger!"

The deck below them began to fold inwards, giving the Naked Sol a more stream-lined look. It no longer appeared to look like a ship, but more like a sharp knife-hence the name.

Tsumugu turned his head up to the Original Life Fiber, the surprised look on his face turning into a victorious smirk.

Akio followed his line of sight, his eyes narrowing in confusing before he too realized what his brother was planning. The son of a bitch was going to send the ship right into the heart of it! It was one of those things that was so ridiculously crazy that it might work. Taking into account the world he lived in and the people he knew, it was right up their alley. Crazy and insane was where they thrived.

"Oh, you want to use the blade to peel that gourd bare, huh?"
Tsumugu laughed. "I love it!"

Akio shook his head, but couldn't help but grin himself. This was going to be something, he knew that much.

"Mako, you should get down below," Akio advised her and ushered her towards the door that lead to below the deck. "We'll take care of things up here."

Mako looked at the door and then to Akio before nodding, trotting off to do as she was told.

Tsumugu and Akio shared a look, both nodding at each other. Tsumugu ran below deck to orchestrate things down there, while Akio ran up to the helm where Aikuro was currently.

There was no more time to think on Ragyo now. The fight was far, far from over.

Ryuko and Senketsu tore through the tough outer layer of the Original Life Fiber, finally making it to its core.

She had to bite back a gasp as they finally entered the center of the vessel. It was... huge. The inside looked like one, giant spider web. The orange Life Fibers were everywhere. And there, in the very center, was a giant orange ball.

"We're here, Ryuko! That's the core!"

Ryuko nodded. It certainly was. And if that was the core...

"Let's do it!"

She pointed her swords backwards, giving them space.

"Both halves: Decapitation mode!"

The two scissor blades expanded, reaching their true length.

Swinging her arms forwards, Ryuko grinned as she thought about what came next.

In perfect synchronization with his partner, Senketsu pumped energy into his thrusters, and the two shot forwards.

"Finishing move: Sen-i-Soshitsu!"

Ryuko's heart raced as the two flew towards the core. This was it! With the destruction of the Original Life Fiber, they'd deal a huge blow to Ragyo and her Life Fibers!

"HYAAAAAAAAA!"

Ryuko swung her blades forwards, sparks emitting from her blades as they smacked against the sturdy core.

Senketsu matched Ryuko's battle cry, sending more power to his thrusters.

Even with the increased force, the blades wouldn't cut through.

"Damn it!" Ryuko grunted. "This thing is tough!"

"But not invincible!"

Ryuko grinned. "Right!"

Oh, she was far from done! She was going to destroy this piece of shit, and then get back to her friends!

A barrage of missiles slammed into the side of the Naked Sol, rocking the ship dangerously.

Aikuro, Akio, and Soroi all grabbed a hold of something to keep themselves from falling as the ship rocked back and forth.

"We can't take another hit like that!" Akio shouted, his eyes drawn to the diagnostics on the screen beside him.

Aikuro growled, his hands moving like lightening as he tried to keep the ship right side up.

"Damage report!" He called out through the intercom.

"Major damage to the first and third turbines!" A female voice answered. "The remaining turbine is putting out all it can!"

Akio gritted his teeth, anger building in his chest. Was this all they could really do?! Was this really as far as this ship could take them?!

"Crap!" Aikuro cursed and slammed his fist into the controls. "This is as far as we can get on human power, huh?"

"No!" Akio shook his head. "No, that's bullshit! We've come this far, we can sure as hell finish it!"

It couldn't end this way! Not after as far as they had come. They had put their blood, sweat, and tears into this. It just could not end this way. Akio knew, he just *knew* that Ryuko was there in the core of the Original Life Fiber. Knowing her, she was probably already hacking away at it.

Akio clenched his fists. He wouldn't allow her to do it by herself. Not anymore.

And then, as if God himself had heard Akio's cry of anguish, a binging noise came from one of the nearby terminals.

Akio dashed to the terminal that made the noise, bending down in front of it.

It was the energy output screen, and from the looks of it, the energy being put out by the second turbine was growing by the second.

"Mr. Mikisugi!" The voice cried over the intercom. "The turbine has started turning again! Or rather, it's spinning like crazy!"

"What? How?"

"You can thank your friend Mako for that one," The voice laughed. "She's powering the whole ship by herself!"

Akio's eyes widened. Mako?!

As if on cue, the energy output spiked, reaching full capacity. The thrusters of the Naked Sol increased in velocity, sending the ship barreling across the water.

The ship rocked at the sudden increase in speed, nearly sending everyone on the bridge to their knees once more.

"Ha! Mankanshoku to the rescue once again!" Aikuro laughed as he calmly controlled the helm. "I owe her one hell of a dinner once this is all said and done!"

Akio laughed as well, grabbing onto the nearby terminal to steady himself. Even though their group had the likes of Satsuki and Ryuko in it, it was once again Mako that saved the day.

"Hold on tight!"

The speed of the Naked Sol only increased, eventually reaching the point where the ship itself began to take flight.

"There's more of them!" The intercom rang out. "There's more of them powering the turbine now!"

Akio laughed again, this time louder and filled with joy. In that moment he threw aside his feelings of anger and sadness, even his previous dark thoughts. Instead, he focused on the brilliance that was taking place. It wasn't the technology or clever thinking that was going to ensure their success. No, it was the strength of his comrades! Of his friends! Of his family! It was almost too poetic.

Keeping a steady hold on the terminal, Akio remained standing as the Naked Sol flew through the air. For something like this, he refused to take a seat. He was going to remain standing come hell nor high water. He was going to watch as they brought down the Original Life Fiber, standing on his own two feet.

"Brace for impact!"

The front of the Naked Sol slammed into the giant orange vessel, tearing through the surface like wet paper.

The Naked Sol entered the Original Life Fiber, the ship moving straight for the core.

And there, right in the center, was Ryuko.

"Give it all its got, Aikuro!" Akio shouted, his grin widening. "Let's bring down this bloated piece of shit!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Aikuro laughed, pushing on a couple of levers and pressing a couple of buttons. The thrusters increased even more in power, sending the Naked Sol directly at the very core of it.

Ryuko turned her head to the ship beside her, a very toothy grin growing on her lips.

Increasing her own power, Ryuko matched the Naked Sol's push. With their combined strength, the Original Life Fiber never stood a chance.

Both the Naked Sol and Ryuko pushed through the core, flying out the back side of the vessel and into the skies above. The now dead Original Life Fiber fell towards the Academy, slamming into one of its walls and destroying dozens of homes in the process.

The bridge erupted into a fit of cheers, even the normally reserved Soroi giving a whoop in celebration.

They had done it. With the strength of their hearts they had destroyed the Original Life Fiber, and dealt a huge blow to the Life Fibers agenda.

Akio cheered and raised his fist in the air, his shouts of happiness echoed by his brother.

"We did it! We really fucking did it!"

Akio walked over to his brother, wrapping him a celebratory hug. The two of them- no, the entirety of Nudist Beach, had been working towards this outcome for years. They had given up so much to have this dream realized... They had all pulled all-nighters, gone through dangerous recon missions, had to put up with rigorous training... And now, they were just one step away from total victory! They just had to clear out the remnants of the Life Fibers, and then they were done. Victory was so *damn* close!

It was almost too good to be true.

Aikuro laughed, patting Akio's back multiple times in excitement, Akio ignoring the pain in his injuries. Neither seemed to care that the Naked Sol was now airborne and would soon collide into Honnou City.

"Did you really think we wouldn't?!" Aikuro laughed.

"I should know better by now!"

"Uh, sirs?" Soroi spoke up.

"What is it, Soroi?" Aikuro broke away from the hug and smiled at the man.

"It appears that we're about to-"

Before the butler could finish, the Naked Sol slammed head first into the inner walls of Honnouji Academy.

The impact sent shocks throughout the ship, causing everyone to fall over this time.

Akio winced when he hit the ground, his previous bravado gone. To be frank, falling flat on his rear end and bumping his broken arm into the ground hurt quite a bit.

"Ow..." Akio mumbled, slowly picking himself up off the ground and rubbing his mending left arm. He had half a mind to complain that Soroi hadn't warned them earlier, but he knew that it would be an unfair complaint. It wasn't like either him or Aikuro were paying much attention to where they were landing.

"Is everyone alright?" Aikuro asked as he rose to his feet. "That was one hell of a bumpy landing."

"I am fine, thank you," Soroi answered as he rose to his feet, dusting himself off.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Akio mumbled as he too stood.

Aikuro dusted himself off, his eyes moving to the deck.

"I guess we should get out there, huh? We're not done just yet."

Akio frowned and nodded. He couldn't get ahead of himself now. There was still work to be done.

But that didn't mean he didn't have a bone to pick with a certain someone...

Akio followed Aikuro onto the deck, their eyes wide as they looked around. How a ship the size of Naked Sol was able to stay stuck so firmly in the walls of the Honnouji Academy was beyond them.

He shook his head. Now was not the time to be awestruck.

As the two walked further onto the deck, more and more of the group began to make their way to the center. Akio saw the Elite Four and Satsuki huddle together and talk to each other, as well as Mako, Tsumugu, and the rest of the Academy students make their way from below deck.

Satsuki's eyes drifted from her posse in front of her to Akio, her eyes narrowing slightly. It wasn't out of anger or suspicion, but more out of curiosity.

Akio ignored her questioning stare as his eyes scanned the deck, looking for a certain someone.

Ryuko landed on the deck beside where Satsuki was standing, Senketsu sparkling as he deactivated the minute her feet touched the ground.

"No, go ahead," Aikuro deadpanned as Akio began to walk away. "We have enough time for a lover's quarrel."

Akio ignored his brother's snarky remark, his feet bringing him towards Ryuko. If he was paying more attention, he would have noticed the fact that Aikuro had once again mentioned his knowledge of the two's relationship.

Ryuko's eyes drifted from Satsuki, meeting Akio's gaze as she frowned. Akio wasn't the only one with some grievances to air out. Striding towards Akio, Ryuko's glare deepened.

"What the hell was that?!" The two asked at the same time.

Akio crossed his arms, tilting his head to the side.

Ryuko huffed, placing her hands on her hips and glaring at Akio.

"What do you mean, 'what the hell was that?'" Ryuko spoke first. "It was thanks to my quick thinking that we got the upper hand on Ragyo. I don't see how I did anything wrong."

"Quick thinking?" Akio scoffed. "You call nearly getting killed quick thinking? You scared the shit of me! I thought you were dead!"

Ryuko flinched, her eyes showing a hint of guilt.

"Well, uh...," Ryuko mumbled, snapping her fingers when she thought of a comeback. "What about you and your 'no more fighting' bullshit! You were out there in the thick of it!"

Akio's glare faltered. That's right... he was...

Ryuko pursed her lips, a pensive expression on her face.

"... Even stevens?"

"Even stevens," Akio answered immediately and shook Ryuko's hand.

Ryuko grinned, grabbing tightly onto his hand and pulling him into a hug.

"I'm glad you didn't do anything *too* stupid," She whispered into his ear as her arms tightened around him.

"Me too," Akio sighed with a smile, returning the hug and kissing the top of her head. "I'm just glad you're alright."

Ryuko nodded into his chest, the two completely oblivious to the eyes that were watching them.

"Akio, may I have a word?"

Akio flinched and broke away from the hug, turning his head to Satsuki. Had she been watching them the entire time?

As his eyes scanned the rest of the deck, he realized that she wasn't the only one that was watching Ryuko and Akio. The Mankanshokus were, too, with stars in their eyes and smiles on their faces. That ought to be fun to deal with later, if their reactions were anything like Mako's.

His eyes widened as he realized that there were in fact nearly a hundred people on the deck. Their numbers had increased thanks to all of the lives saved by Mako and the others, and Akio even recognized some of them, but he wasn't expecting so many like this. He spotted Fukuroda, Hakodate, hell, even that slimy Cooking Club president he fought with oh so long ago was there.

However, he didn't see his parents.

Akio ignored their gazes, stepping aside and bringing Satsuki with him.

The minute Akio had cleared the area, Mako barreled into Ryuko, tackling her into the ground and giving her a great big hug. It seemed that Akio wasn't the only one glad to see her safe and sound.

"So, what's up?" He asked.

"About earlier..." Satsuki began slowly.

"Yes?"

"What did you do?"

Akio blinked. It was very clear what he did.

"What do you mean?"

"What the hell did you use to cause that?" Satsuki said in a hushed whisper. "I've never seen anything like that in my life."

Akio nodded, his expression darkening slightly. That's right. Satsuki, Ryuko and the Elite Four had been right there in the thick of it. Other than the seven of them, no one else had really seen what had happened up close. He wasn't even sure that Ryuko had seen it, for that matter.

"It's called the S.A.B.," Akio explained. "The Special Adhesive Bullet. It renders any Life Fiber infused clothing useless. Considering that your-"

"That Ragyo is a Life Fiber hybrid, you thought it would kill her," Satsuki finished for him.

"Yes."

Satsuki took a deep breath, shaking her head slightly in disbelief.

"Where do you get such a thing?"

"Nudist Beach has some great researchers," Akio shrugged. "Your father being one of them."

Satsuki's eye twitched at the mention of her father, but she moved past it.

"Regardless of its origins, that was some intelligent thinking. It certainly did the trick."

"I expected as much," Akio allowed himself a small smile. "Good. Now all we have to do is take care of the rest of them."

Satsuki frowned. "She isn't dead yet, you know."

She... wasn't?! But... but Akio had hit her dead on! Damn it, did she really survive that?!

"Please tell me you're-"

"ATTENTION, WORTHLESS TRASH OF HONNOUJI ACADEMY!"

Akio and Satsuki both turned their heads up to the sky above, everyone else on the deck doing the same.

"THE SHOW IS NOT YET OVER!"

Nui's form illuminated the sky, her body towering over them. The once childish and playful expression that was so common on the girl's face was replaced with one of insanity and anger. But it wasn't only that that had changed. Akio noted with great pleasure that she didn't have either of her arms; something else that he must have missed when he was unconscious.

"That Kamui and those idiotic Goku Uniforms, you were all just the opening act!" Nui continued, her crazed expression only growing in intensity. "The headline act is the ultimately chic and elegant fashion show put on by the ultimate Grand couturier and her ultimate model! Prepare yourselves!"

As Nui finished, a cascade of explosions flowed up the giant tower of Honnouji Academy as the tower itself began to split in half.

"What the hell?" Akio muttered

"Shinra-Koketsu..." Satsuki frowned beside him, her eyes darkening.

"Shinra what?"

"Come."

Satsuki turned and walked away, leaving Akio's question unanswered.

Akio rolled his eyes, following closely after her.

The two walked back towards the center of the deck where the rest of them were waiting on the two.

"Magnificent, Iori," Satsuki commended the Sewing Club president as she stopped beside him. "I am amazed you restored this many Goku Uniforms."

Iori nodded, his eyes scanning the rows and rows of Honnouji students as he admired his handiwork. Akio couldn't help but let out a whistle. It sure couldn't have been easy to create all of these uniforms in the time period he had, but yet here they were.

"I didn't just restore them," Iori replied. "I made them even more powerful!"

"I'm not surprised," Satsuki smiled.

Akio had to admit, it was odd seeing such pride for her subordinates coming from Satsuki. She usually just accepted their achievements with a blank face and some emotionless pat on the back, but not today. Honestly, it was a nice to see her like this.

"We've got ultimate load outs too!"

Akio looked over as Tsumugu and Aikuro came on to the scene in their DTRs, with Ryuko close behind them.

"We've incapacitated the Original Life Fiber!" Aikuro shouted. "Now we must fight our way into Honnouji Academy, destroy its transmitter, and apprehend Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime!"

"We should be quick," Akio added. "They're not at one hundred percent. If we push our advantage, we should be able to win the day."

"But before that... -"

All eyes turned to the quiet butler Soroi, wheeling a cart stocked to the brim with tea in fancy cups.

"Soroi?" Satsuki blinked.

"Yes," The butler said as he stepped away from the cart and motioned to it. "Please, have some tea first."

"Well, alrighty then," Akio grinned, being the first one to speak. Oh, he remembered how amazing Soroi's tea was. Life or death circumstances or not, he was going to have some of this tea.

But first, he walked over to Ryuko and grabbed her hand, tugging her along with him.

"H-hey! What's the big idea?" Ryuko fussed as she was pulled.

"You've got to have some of this tea," Akio smiled. "It's quite literally the best tea I've ever had."

"Okay, but you don't need to pull me," Ryuko huffed and slapped at Akio's hand, but Akio only grinned wider. It reminded him of the times the two had had in the past before things became so chaotic.

Bringing Ryuko to the cart, Akio grabbed a cup of tea and handed it to her, then grabbed one for himself. Ryuko grumbled a bit more at being pulled along, but she accepted the tea regardless.

With their teacups in hand, the two stepped off to the side to allow everyone else to get some.

"So, what did Satsuki want earlier?" Ryuko asked as she fell into step with Akio, blowing on her tea and taking a small sip.

"Oh, nothing of importance," Akio answered. It wasn't a *total* lie. "Just touching base."

Ryuko nodded as she walked, a slight bounce in her step. Noticing this, Akio glanced over at her, raising an eyebrow.

"You seem awfully peppy."

"Eh," Ryuko shrugged. "More excited than anything."

"Oh?" Akio asked, coming to a stop and facing her. Bringing the cup to his mouth, he mimicked Ryuko's earlier movements and took a small sip, savoring the taste.

"Yeah. We're just so close to the end now that I can almost taste it," Ryuko elaborated with a toothy grin. "And once we're done with this bullshit, we can finally go back to our normal lives."

"Back to our normal lives, huh? You're the *last* person I expected that to come from."

"Jerk," Ryuko bopped Akio in the arm, playfully glaring at him.

"I just wasn't expecting you to like 'normal,'" Akio chuckled and rubbed where Ryuko had hit him. He wouldn't say it, but her playful punches actually kind of hurt...

"What can I say," Ryuko smiled, placing a hand on her hip. "I kinda like normal now."

"You don't say," Akio smirked. "How about this, once everything's said and done I'll treat you to a nice and normal home cooked meal."

"Eh."

"Eh?"

"You've already promised that."

"Fine," Akio rolled his eyes over his teacup. "You pick then."

"Alright, I will!" Ryuko nodded, her lips pursing as she thought. "I'll pick something good, too..."

Akio only rolled his eyes once more, his gaze moving to the rest of the ship deck. Everyone else seemed to be drinking their tea and conversing, enjoying the little bit of time they had before the final

fight began. The Elite Four and Satsuki were happily talking to each other, Tsumugu and Aikuro were laughing over something, and the Mankanshokus were shoveling food into their mouths. And if Akio didn't know any better, he'd say that Fukuroda and Hakodate were flirting. Interesting.

Sighing, Akio took a sip from his tea. It was strange. Given the week he's had, he should be a mess. He should be a blubbering, broken heap of a man. He had been captured, tortured- both mentally and physically, he had attempted murder, and he had nearly lost himself and someone he loved. If things were only slightly different, his life would either be over or completely ruined. And yet, it wasn't, and here he was, enjoying a cup of tea.

Even with all of that, he felt happiness. More than anything, this was what he wanted. This close community. This group of friends and loved ones. This time with Ryuko. He would give anything, spare his own life or another's, to have another one of these moments.

Only one more fight, Akio thought to himself. Deep down, he knew that was the truth this time.

"Okay, I've got something."

"Yes?" Akio prompted, his eyes moving back to Ryuko. This ought to be good.

"If we finish this fight in less than three hours, you have to make me dinner, *and* give me a foot and back rub."

Akio blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Ryuko's smile grew. "A foot and back rub. At least a half an hour each."

Akio looked down at her feet, grimacing when he saw the familiar pair of dirty white sneakers. Ew. God knows how dirty and nasty they'd be.

But it wouldn't be Akio if he didn't make at least *once* snarky remark.

"Feet, huh? I didn't take you for one of *those* people, Ryuko-"

Before he could finish the sentence, Ryuko swung at his head with her free hand.

"H-hey! If you're into that kind of thing, I won't judge!" Akio laughed as he ducked under the fist, backing away. "Jeez, i-it was a joke! A joke!"

"It was a bad one!" Ryuko charged after him, her cheeks turning red. "Come here, you son of a-!"

"You're going to spill your tea, you know!"

"Like I care!"

"Well, that's just rude! Soroi probably spent a long time working on that!"

Akio sprinted carefully with his cup of tea in front of him, keeping his distance from the blushing and swinging Ryuko. Neither seemed to care about what a scene they were causing, or who was watching.

Satsuki looked up from her teacup, a genuine smile growing on her lips as she watched the two horse around.

Even with the fate of the world hanging in the balance, Akio and Ryuko were able to put that aside and enjoy this short time they had together.

It gave Satsuki hope.

She knew, deep down, that this wouldn't be the last time they all had together.

Author's Notes:

And there you have it! A little shorter than the other chapters, but I thought it was a good set up for the next and final fight with Ragyo and Nui.

Hopefully the next update won't take as long as the others, but don't count on it. With it being the last episode of the anime, it will probably take me a while to finish it, since I want to do it justice!

Anyhow, thanks for reading everyone! Your guys constant support of me and this story is very, very heartwarming. I hope I continue to impress!

Until next time!

Retribution, Part I

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the first part of the "finale!"

As you can see, I decided to cut this into a two parter. The events of this chapter I wanted to stand a bit more independent from the events of next chapter. Hence, the two parter.

Anyhow, I hope you're all ready for the final fight with Ragyo and Nui! I hope it lives up to the expectations. Normally, a chapter of this length wouldn't take me this long. But, for a chapter like this specific one, I did a lot of writing and rewriting. I had a big brainstorm on how Akio has influenced the endgame, and what that said end would look like thanks to his influence. ESPECIALLY with Ragyo. I mean, if absolutely NOTHING had changed in the end, that'd be a pretty big failure for writing an OC.

I went back and forth on a bunch of stuff I wanted to do, but in the end, this is the finished picture. And of course, it won't be a 100% like the show.

Well, enough of that, let's get on with it!

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Akio, Mako, Tsumugu and Aikuro, the Elite Four, and the rest of the Academy forces strolled into the entrance of the Academy's courtyard, where the transmitter itself was located. The plan was simple, really. Akio and the others would go for the transmitter while Ryuko and Satsuki went for Ragyo and Nui.

He had half a mind to join the two girls, but Satsuki made clear to remind him of his declaration of letting the two of them handle it

while he stayed on the sidelines. So, that's how he found himself helping coordinate the frontal assault. Honestly, he probably would have found himself here anyways.

In the end, Ryuko and Akio's farewell had been brief. In fact, it was barely even one. Neither one of them wanted to acknowledge that there was a slim chance that this could be the very last time they would see each other. The two of them just couldn't bring themselves to say goodbye or good luck. So, instead, they both told each other that they would see the other soon.

It seemed fitting, for the two. Why say it in words, when you could say it in your actions?

Popping his neck and rotating his shoulder blades, Akio readied himself for the soon-to-be battle for the fate of the world.

"CHARGE!" Aikuro shouted, giving the order to attack.

The army of Honnouji Academy spilled into the courtyard, nearly a hundred One Stars leading the way. The minute the group had made it fully into the courtyard, their goal was made clear. Destroy the transmitter, defeat Ragyo and Nui, and save the world.

There were no more time for pleasantries, nor any time for well wishes. They had to get in and win the day, and they had to do it quickly now. Akio knew what his enemy was capable of, but he didn't know *how* capable they were. They were battered and bruised, but there was no way they could underestimate the likes of Nui and Ragyo. For all he knew, they could wipe them all out in one fell swoop, and they just couldn't have that. The two were unpredictable, so they had to be ready for anything.

One thing was for sure, this would not be their final day.

"Go, go, go!" Akio cried out over the battle cries, ushering the group forwards. "Go for the transmitter! Destroy it! Tear it down! Tear *them* down! Show these freaks that humanity is not to be fucked with!"

The One Stars sprinted towards the tower, their battle cries ringing out above all else.

So far, there was no opposition. The courtyard was empty except for the Honnouji forces and the transmitter in the middle. That was a good sign on the surface, but it also meant that they still had no clue what they were going up against.

"Way ahead of you!" Uzu shouted as he sprinted past Akio.

The One Star students came together to form a makeshift tower, their bodies forming the foundation of it. The quickly made tower easily reached the same height as the transmitter. How they were able to pull something off with so little time was beyond Akio. He guessed it was just another instance of Satsuki's great leadership.

Uzu ran forwards, planting one foot on the ground and leaping towards the human-made tower. With swift and nimble steps, he climbed to the top, his green sword shining brightly.

"How do you like it?!" Uzu boasted as the tower of One Stars began to lean towards the tower. "This is the Ultra Goku Uniform Centurion Cavalry Formation!"

Akio had to admit, the Elite Four sure had a way with names.

"Charge!"

The tower fell against the tower of a transmitter, but every student that fell into it was knocked away by a force field.

"Damn it," Akio cursed to himself as he watched from the ground below. He had feared as much. There was no way it was going to be standing out in the open completely defenseless. That'd just be too easy.

Uzu wasn't done yet, however. Jumping across the falling bodies as if they were stepping stones, he catapulted himself towards the

transmitter. Lunging forwards mid air, he thrust his green sword into the shield of the transmitter.

Electricity crackled as the sword fought against the shield, but if Uzu's flailing body was any indication, he was getting nowhere.

Within seconds the shield threw him back, another attack repelled.

"It's the High Velocity Life Fiber Jammer," Iori explained. "It spins tiny Life Fibers at high speed to-"

"It's a big, rubber barrier!" Mako finished for him.

Akio sighed and walked over to the fallen Uzu, offering him a hand.

"You alright?"

"Yeah," Uzu grumbled as he grabbed onto Akio's hand and hoisted himself up. "Ow..."

"That's what you get for running ahead by yourself!" Nonon snarked at him.

"You never learn, do you," Inumuta sighed.

"Enough of the sass," Akio chided, albeit with a small grin. "We have to turn off that jammer somehow."

But how? It was a force field made of Life Fibers. It wasn't like they were attached to some type of energy source, so they couldn't just destroy some generator or other power source. They had to punch through it somehow...

Boom!

An explosion sounded from above, causing everyone down below to turn their heads.

It came from the top of the tower.

"Damn it," Akio grimaced, his fists clenching at his sides. He had no clue how their fight was going, and that fact killed him.

The smoke from the tower cleared as a blast of light shot out, so bright that Akio had to cover his eyes with the crook of his arm.

"Ngh!"

It was so damn bright! Why was it so damn bright?

Even with the blinding light raining down on him, he could notice several other small, star shaped flashes emit from everyone in the courtyard, as well as himself.

Looking down at his chest, he saw the three golden stars slowly fade away. With the three stars gone, now he was just left with a regular black jacket.

"Shit," Akio cursed to himself, patting the area where his stars once were. It didn't take a genius to understand what had just occurred. He didn't know how they had done it, but Ragyo and Nui had just stripped them of their power.

Then, as if something was triggered, a great weight slammed into Akio's shoulders, nearly pushing him down to the ground.

"W-what the hell?!"

It was like someone had just increased the gravity! He could barely move his limbs!

Whatever Ragyo's 'Shinra-Koketsu' was, it was going to be a major pain in the ass.

"Akio look!"

Akio rose his head at Mako's call, his eyes moving to the transmitter they were trying to destroy.

Several compartments opened up along the side of the tower, allowing for projectors to poke out and shoot their images at the air around them.

"What?" Akio gasped, his eyes moving from each of the projected images that were floating in the sky. Each one of them depicted a different part of the world, from everything to Paris to New York, and New Guinea to Greenland. The images showed regular people going about their daily lives, completely unaware that they were in fact wearing ticking time bombs.

Akio's eyes widened, his surprised look turning into a snarl. Ragyo was showing them the lives that would be lost to the Life Fibers. She was showing them those who might as well be at Death's door.

She was showing them how useless they really were in stopping her.

The images began to change. Instead of showing civilians, it began to show suits lock hands as they formed a giant net, which slowly would envelop the world. Like a cocoon, of sorts. After trembling for a few moments, the cocoon shattered, and small pieces of what was once Earth flew across the screen.

It wasn't hard to put the pieces together. The human race would be absorbed by their clothes, and then those COVERS will cover the world in a cocoon. When the time was right, the cocoon would open, and Life Fibers would spill out across the cosmos.

Akio's fists tightened. And as of now, there was nothing that he could do about it. Whatever the hell Ragyo was doing made him feel like lead.

"What is going on?" Akio whispered through grit teeth, looking down at his shaking hands. He knew it was because of his uniform, but why was it acting this way?

Looking at the rest of the Elite Four and Mako, they were all having the same difficulties. Even Gamagoori was having a hard time

moving.

"Not on our watch!"

Akio forced his head up, watching with wide eyes as Tsumugu and Aikuro ran towards where the light was coming from, and inevitably where Ragyo was.

"D-don't!" Akio called out to them, but it was too late.

The two scaled the tower in the blink of an eye. Compared to everyone else, they were moving at the speed of light.

The two jumped to the top of the tower, their DTRs combining mid air to form the Ultimate Double Naked DTR.

Akio blinked a few times in surprise, but that was quickly dashed when they were knocked off of the tower by Ragyo, and sent flipping into the transmitter's force field.

Akio sighed. So much for that.

"G-Gamagoori!" Akio shouted, turning his head to the giant. "C-can you move?!"

Gamagoori nodded, moving his arms and legs around as he tested his strength. His limbs and body was shaking at the exertion, but he could still move.

"Y-you have to ta-take us up there!" Akio stammered, slowly moving his leaden feet to the giant. "W-we have t-to st-stop this! O-otherwise we're as good as d-dead!"

Gamagoori nodded again, reaching out to grab Akio and place him on his giant shoulder. Akio wrapped his arms around the giant spike on his shoulder, letting his tired head rest against Gamagoori's shoulder. The weight that was pressing down on him was nearly getting the best of him.

Slowly but surely, he made his way to the other Elite Four members and Mako, picking each of them up. With Uzu and Inumuta in one arm, Nonon in the other, and then Akio on one shoulder while Mako clung to his back, the group slowly made their way to the staircase.

Akio perked his head up, hearing a ominous rushing sound coming from off in the distance. It sounded an awful lot like...

A wave of blood red water fell upon the Academy, breaking into the courtyard and threatening to wash away all of its inhabitants.

"Gamagoori, hurry!" Akio shouted, slapping on his back.

The giant sped up, his feet picking up its pace as he hobbled towards the stairs.

Akio looked back at the whirlpool of red water, watching as the liquid began to engulf the entire courtyard. The One Stars were washed away, along with Aikuro and Tsumugu in their DTRs. Soon, the water would get them too.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Mako cried, slapping on Gamagoori's broad shoulders.

Gamagoori picked up his pace, making his way to the stairs just as the water rushed to where they were once standing.

Akio sighed in relief, very pleased by the fact that Gamagoori was moving up the stairs faster than the water could reach them.

If anything, Gamagoori was moving even faster now up the stairs. If Akio was a guessing man, he'd wager that the thought of Satsuki in danger was pushing him ever harder. Akio couldn't blame him. If he had the body of Gamagoori, he'd be hustling up these stairs too.

As the group climbed the stairs, to avoid the on-rushing water, the sound of voices became more and more apparent.

"The Original Life Fiber?!" Akio heard Ryuko exclaim. "It's still alive?"

So that's what the water was! It was the Original Life Fiber! Damn, he had thought that it was dead. Clearly not, if the red water was any indication.

Hearing this, Gamagoori picked up the pace even further.

"The Original Life Fiber will absorb you and your friends and be restored to health. I am sorry, Ryuko. The ploy you risked your life for was all for nothing."

"Not yet!" Gamagoori shouted, his foot landing on the final step, his head poking over the ledge. "We aren't done just yet!"

"Gamagoori? Mako? Guys?" Ryuko mumbled, her eyes widening as she looked over to the shaking Gamagoori as he climbed up the stairs.

"Oh my," Nui giggled. "You must have superhuman strength to be able to move in the Absolute Submission field. But it's no use. Humans are still slaves to clothes!"

Akio ignored Nui, his eyes moving to Ragyo who was standing back behind her. The Kiryuin was wearing a white, luxurious looking robe, with a shiny red decal along the hems of the outfit. The hood of the outfit was up over her head, the inside of it a bright rainbow color just like her hair had been.

That must have been Shinra-Koketsu. The supposed ultimate Life Fiber uniform.

Akio would guess that the glowing orange ball in her hands was the cause of the force that was weighing down on them.

However, Akio did smirk slightly when he noticed her face. In the center of her forehead was a red, sickly looking circle. The skin there was still bleeding and fleshy looking, her regenerative skills clearly not able to heal it completely. It was no doubt where Akio's shot had gone through.

And from there, the rest of her face had began deteriorating. The complexion of her face had changed from the pure white it was originally to a more sickly grey looking color. The skin itself wasn't doing that much better. It was beginning to peel in many places, so much so that in a few cases there were pieces hanging from her face.

Her eyes were bloodshot and slightly crazed looking. The once fake elegance and grace that had once been present in them was shattered, replaced with something else. Be it anger, insanity, or pain, Akio did not know.

But they were watching him very closely.

Gamagoori kept pushing forwards regardless of Nui's words, his eyes closed in concentration as he pushed forwards.

Mako, on the other hand, had other ideas.

"That relationship will never change!"

Mako, using her jaw, flung herself off of Gamagoori's back

"M-Mako!" Akio cried out to her, but it was no use. There was no way Akio could do what she did. "G-get away!"

Mako flopped across the rubble, eventually coming towards Nui and coming to her feet.

"That's not true! That isn't true at all!" Mako exclaimed. "I mean, with Ryuko and Senketsu, neither one of them is the boss! They have a lovely partnership between human and clothing!"

Nui smirked as she stepped forwards, her artificial hands turning into makeshift blades.

"Mankanshoku!"

Gamagoori tossed everyone he was holding aside, and ran forwards. Even with the Submission field, Gamagoori was running like a mad man to protect Mako from danger.

Akio hit the ground, wincing as his bad arm hit the hard concrete. Even so, he kept his eyes peeled on Gamagoori. He knew exactly what Gamagoori was going to do, because he would do the same.

He held his hand out as if to stop him, letting it drop uselessly to the ground. It was pointless.

Nui reeled back, striking towards Mako, only for Gamagoori to jump between the two and take the strike in her stead. The blade pierced his abdomen, blood immediately spewing from the wound.

"G-Gamagoori!" Mako exclaimed, her eyes wide in terror at the sight of her upperclassman in front of her, bleeding out.

Akio pushed himself off the ground with shaking his arms, making his way to his feet. He, he had to do something!

Gamagoori grabbed onto Nui's blade arm with both of his gigantic hands, his grip like iron as he clamped down.

"Honnouji Academy Disciplinary Committee Chair Ira Gamagoori!" The Disciplinary Chair shouted, his intensity increasing with each word. "I protect Satsuki Kiryuin and all students of Honnouji Academy!"

He pulled the blade out of his body.

"Know that I am..." Gamagoori paused to toss Nui over his head. "A living shield that..."

Gamagoori never finished those words. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, his body falling to the floor completely lifeless.

Akio growled and pushed himself to his feet, slowly hobbling over to the fallen man. He couldn't be dead. He just couldn't be. Not now.

Not like this.

"Ugly, ugly, ugly!"

Akio raised his head, turning to where the voice was coming from.

Nui had been able to right herself midair, and then changed her artificial arms into a pair of wings, which she then used to fly back towards where Mako was hunched over Gamagoori.

"Damn, damn, damn," Akio grumbled to himself, his feet moving at a snail's pace. Even with all of the strength he was using to try and just move a few feet, his feet could hardly move an inch off the ground. He had to settle for shuffling, and with the way he was moving he wouldn't make it.

"Die, you ugly ape!"

However, it looked like he wouldn't have to.

Ryuko bolted past him, raising her two scissor blades and crossing them to stop the attack from Nui.

The two clashed swords, Nui letting out a gasp in surprise, along with Akio.

Ryuko had stripped down to her underwear, giving her the necessary speed to make it to Mako and Gamagoori in time. Without Senketsu weighing her down, she was able to move much quicker than anyone else.

"Like hell you will!" Ryuko growled, shoving Nui off.

Akio stopped, placing his hands on his knees as he gasped for air. Just the movement alone was difficult.

"Gamagoori..." Akio breathed, his eyes moving to the downed man.

Ryuko and Nui stared each other down while Akio and the others rested, each combatant glaring daggers at their opponent.

"I won't allow you to hurt them!" Ryuko shouted, brandishing her swords. Thanks to her hybrid body, it seemed that the Submission field wasn't working on her. Her anatomy was a blessing in disguise in this instance, at least.

Nui growled, then jumped towards Ryuko and slashed at her with her artificial arms.

Ryuko deflected the first attack, and the two fell into an onslaught of attacks and counters. All the while, Ragyo stayed put, watching the scene play out emotionlessly.

With the minor lull, Akio used the opportunity to drag his leaden body towards Gamagoori, his slow walk stopping when he heard Gamagoori utter his final words.

"G-Gamagoori," Mako blubbered, her hands shaking his shoulder, tears welling in her eyes.

Gamagoori's eyes opened slowly, his pupils moving to the small sprightly girl by his side.

"Are you safe, Mankanshoku?" Gamagoori whispered, then let his head rest on the concrete. He didn't wait for a reply. "Then it was worth it..."

Akio's eyes widened, the color draining from his face.

"Gamagoori!" Mako cried, shaking the man a little harder, but he didn't move anymore.

Akio looked up from the two on the ground to the Elite Four behind them. Each of them looked just as shell shocked.

"Ira!" Mako spoke a even louder, her hands shaking him even harder.

Still nothing.

Mako began to sniffle, which inevitably erupted into her crying her eyes out.

Her hands fell back to her side, tears streaming down her face.

"Gamagoori!" Satsuki shouted.

"Harime... damn you..." Uzu croaked, turning his head down in respect for his fallen comrade.

Akio closed his eyes and turned his head away, the sounds of clashing blades all but forgotten in the background. Gamagoori was a good man... even if the two had been enemies for most of the time they knew each other, Akio still thought highly of him.

Ryuko pushed Nui off her, jumping back to safety and keeping some distance between the two.

"You bastards!"

" *RIGHT HERE, RYUKO!* " Ragyo laughed, the ball of light in her hands growing brighter. Nui hopped towards her, slithering around her form and pointing to the center of Ragyo's chest. "This field is being powered by Hououmaru as she sleeps here. This is where you need to aim!"

Akio raised his head, his gaze shifting to Ragyo.

She was toying with them.

"Don't screw with me!"

And Ryuko took the bait.

Ryuko pounced forwards, her blades flashing forwards as she swung at Ragyo's chest.

Ragyo's Shinra-Koketsu blocked each attack, and struck back tenfold. For every swing of a scissor blade, a tendril shot from Shinra-Koketsu and pierced through Ryuko's flesh before retracting again. Rinse and repeat.

Akio ground his teeth as he watched Ryuko struggle, but he honestly couldn't do a thing to help her, and neither could anyone else. With this Submission field on them, they could hardly move, save a few steps.

"Even knowing all of this, you can do *nothing!* "

Another tendril shot forwards, punching through Ryuko's gut and knocking her back.

Akio opened his mouth to speak, but someone beat him to it.

"Ryuko! It's too dangerous!"

Akio blinked. That... that was a voice he had never heard before, but one he could have sworn he had once before. It was very masculine, and one filled with worry at the scene before them.

Turning his head, he looked behind him, only to see Satsuki and Senketsu.

Akio's eyes widened.

And Senketsu.

"Calm down, Senketsu," Satsuki chastised the Kamui.

His eyes widened even further. The fact that Satsuki had answered him only proved his point.

"S-Senketsu?" Akio stammered.

Senketsu's eye moved from Satsuki to Akio, then from Akio to Satsuki, his eye as wide as Akio's.

"You both can hear me?" Senketsu gasped.

"Yes, I can hear you," Satsuki replied for the both of them.

Senketsu's surprise slowly was replaced with understanding, while Akio was still flabbergasted.

He... he could actually hear Senketsu! He had always dreamed of hearing Senketsu talk, and actually being able to converse with him... but not under these circumstances. In a different time and a different place, he'd be jumping for joy.

God, if only Ragyo and Nui weren't here... he would love to just sit down and talk to him.

" AND NOW, WITH THIS, HUMANITY ENDS! "

Akio snapped from his trance, his eyes moving to the courtyard below, where everyone else had looked to.

"My god..."

The red liquid that had rushed into the courtyard had solidified, turning into the familiar orange of Life Fibers. It was as if the Life Fibers had cocooned the entire area in its web; and soon, the rest of the world would follow suit.

Several red lines shot from the transmitter in the middle, all of them aimed towards Akio and the rest group.

Akio barred his teeth and tried to move out of the way, but it was useless in this state. He was as good as caught.

Satsuki and the others were the first to go, the red strings picking them up and snatching them up and away towards the transmitter, which was now where the core of the Original Life Fiber seemed to be located.

"Guys!" Ryuko cried, but it was no use. A tendril shot from Shinra-Koketsu, grabbing onto Ryuko and bringing her into Ragyo's grip. No one was escaping her grasp this time.

Then, the red string came for him next. It wrapped around him like a snake, constricting his body, threatening to squeeze him dry.

Akio gasped for air, a few pained gurgles escaping his lips as the string tightened further. He tried to fight against his bindings, but if anything, they only constricted more around him. If it kept going like this, his ribs would snap like twigs.

He felt himself get lifted from the air, but he did not go towards the Original Life Fiber.

No, he went directly to Ragyo's side.

Akio fought even more enthusiastically against the vice grip when he realized where he was going, but it was no use. His entrapped body stopped right beside Ragyo on her stone stage, his fight for nothing.

"I will *personally* start with your little friend here," Ragyo sneered. "Then we can send what's left to the Original Life Fiber. It can still feast on the energy of the scraps that will be left of him."

Ragyo placed her free hand on Akio's head, her grip tightening and her nails digging into his skin.

Akio winced as his scalp was cut into, but didn't let any audible sounds of pain leave his lips. The gashes were irritating, but they weren't serious.

Nui laughed at the look of pain on Akio's face, even going so far as to poke his cheeks a few times and giggle as she did so.

" *But first, what's a dinner without a show ?*" Ragyo purred.

Akio looked over to Ragyo, who was watching him with wide, crazed eyes. Her tongue snaked out of her teeth, running across her lips.

"What are you talking about you crazy bitch?" Ryuko choked out, her legs dangling in the air as she fought against Ragyo's hand. "Let my friends go!"

A small gap appeared in the Original Life Fiber, wide enough for two grown adults to be lifted out of it... What was she planning on doing? 'Dinner with a show?' What the hell did that even mean?

Akio's eyes widened, his blood running cold as they got closer and came into view.

"No..."

It was impossible. It couldn't be who he thought it was. It was just impossible. There was no way they could be here.

He was seeing things, that had to be it.

The red Life Fiber strings brought the two adults towards them, dropping them on the ground in front of the four.

Akio's breath caught in his throat.

Except he wasn't seeing things.

It was his parents.

Hiroshi and Kasumi, the parents he had been longing to see ever since he had finally called them 'Mom' and 'Dad.' The parents he had pledged to find with Satsuki. The parents he had promised he'd find for Akiko.

And here they were, on the executioner's block.

Hiroshi and Kasumi sprawled out on the ground as they were both freed from their bindings, their bodies trembling as they fought against the weight that was pushing down on them. They both looked pale and ragged, their eyes bloodshot from lack of rest. Their cheek bones looked more predominant, and they both looked like

they had lost twenty pounds since Akio had last seen them. It hurt his heart to see them this way.

Kasumi was the first to look up, her eyes widening in surprise and fear when they met Akio's.

"No! No, no, no!" Akio screamed as he fought against his bindings with renewed vigor. "Stop!"

Ragyo only sneered, Akio's reaction clearly being the one she was looking for.

"A-Akio?" Hiroshi gasped, both he and Kasumi unaware of the Life Fiber tendrils moving towards their necks. "Son, is that-"

"You will be the first to witness the first sacrifices to the Original Life Fiber."

The Life Fiber tentacles wrapped around his parents' necks, lifting them high up in the air.

"Stop it!"

Kasumi and Hiroshi both brought their hands up to their necks to try and fight off the Life Fibers, but it was no use. With the Submission field, and their already weakened strength, there was no way they would be able to free themselves.

Their faces reddened as the Life Fibers tightened around them, tears beginning to well in their eyes as they tried and failed to breathe.

"You bitch!" Akio screamed, tears beginning to well in his eyes. "Why do you have my parents?! Just let them go! I swear to God I'll-!"

"Is that anyway to act when I hold their lives in my hands?" Ragyo replied, clicking her tongue. "Besides, you should be proud. They were great energy sources for the Life Fibers."

"Damn you!" Ryuko growled, struggling even harder against Ragyo's hand.

Ragyo turned to Akio, a perverted smile growing on her lips.

"Don't you see?" Ragyo spoke as the tendril around his parents' necks tightened further. "Your fight was pointless from the beginning. It was a fool's hope. Now, just let me demonstrate how foolish it was to you."

Ragyo raised her free hand, her fingers curling upwards to make a snapping noise.

"Wait! Wait, wait!" Akio shouted. "Don't do this! Please, don't! It wasn't them that pulled that trigger, it was me! Take me instead! I-I'll do anything! Just, just don't-!"

"While your begging is amusing," Ragyo sneer twisted into a scowl. "You must learn the consequences of your actions."

Akio looked over to his parents, his heart dropping into the pit of his stomach.

He met the eyes of his parents one final time. They both were tearing up as they struggled to breathe, but those tears were mixed with ones of sorrow. In that moment, the fear of death left their eyes, and was replaced with something else. Something softer; warmer, even. As to what, Akio just didn't understand.

Ragyo snapped her fingers.

"No!"

Senketsu, having gone into his Shippu form, flew towards Akio's parents, aiming directly for the bindings that held them.

But it was one second too late.

The bone chilling sound of their necks breaking reverberated in Akio's ears, echoing and echoing, over and over.

Senketsu cut through the Life Fibers, releasing the two and letting them fall to the ground.

"NOOOO!" Akio sobbed, now fighting against his bindings like that of a mad man. "No, no, no!"

Ryuko closed her eyes and turned her head away, not daring to look at the two now carcasses on the ground.

Senketsu kept on his trajectory, his front slamming directly into Ragyo's chest and piercing through her hollow heart.

"Huh?"

Ragyo looked down to the Kamui lodged in her chest, her crazed look turning to one of surprise.

"How?"

"Like Ryuko, I am neither clothing nor human!" Senketsu shouted. "Now you will pay for what you did! Shippu Senjin!"

Blades formed on every inch of Senketsu's cloth, the blades digging into Ragyo's flesh as Senketsu pushed forwards, his body rotating like a top.

As he pushed clean through her, Rei's body was ripped from Ragyo's, her sleeping form being sent flying through the air. With Rei no longer powering the Submission field, it began to die.

Akio felt the weight leave his body, his normal strength returning. Even so, the Life Fibers binding him were coiled too tightly, making it impossible to break through. Even if he activated his uniform, it would still be of no use.

But that didn't stop him from struggling regardless. He *had* to get to them.

"Let me go damn it!"

Nui stepped towards him when she noticed his struggling, her artificial hands turning into blades once more.

"The show's over," She growled venomously, her eyes glinting with anger and killing intent. Their plan to make him suffer or not, Nui would no doubt kill him before he could get away.

Ryuko dashed towards him, her scissor blades forming an 'x' as she chopped through the bindings that held him.

Grabbing Akio around the waist with one hand, she kicked Nui away, then jumped back to safety.

The minute Ryuko's feet touched the ground, Akio broke from her grasp and ran towards his downed parents, dropping to his knees beside them. Right now, Ragyo and Nui were the last of his problems.

"No, no, no, please God, no," Akio muttered, his hands hesitating to check their pulses.

Their eyes. It was the eyes made him hesitate. They were lifeless; motionless as they stared listlessly to the sky above. They were unblinking. Blank.

The sight rattled Akio to his core, but he had to move past it. He *had* to know.

He knew that broken necks weren't always one hundred percent fatal. That was just in movies. It actually depended on the severity of the injury if it was fatal. In some cases, people could go on living relatively normal lives afterwards.

But looking at their faces, Akio knew deep down that it wasn't the case.

Swallowing his fear, Akio reached down to their wrists instead to check their pulses. He didn't trust his shaking hands to not make the breaks even worse.

He held his breath, praying to feel even the slightest of bumps against his fingertips.

Akio's hand began to shake even more.

There was nothing.

And there you have it!

You can probably see why I wanted to cut this chapter into a two parter. I wanted the characters' deaths to not be overshadowed by the events that transpire next.

I definitely took leap with this chapter. Hopefully it wasn't too ridiculously out of place.

Welp, I hope you all liked it! If midterms don't kill me this week, hopefully I'll have the final part out soon. After this next part, all that's left is the OVA! That is, for the canon KKK story.

Anyhow, thanks for reading everyone! As always, I appreciate it!

Until next time!

Retribution, Part II

Edit 10/31/15: Sorry about the false update! I didn't realize that when you deleted a chapter it would count as an update... My apologies!

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the big finale of Before My Body is Dry!

Yep, you heard it right. The finale. In the end, I've decided to create a whole new story to contain the OVA and the other chapters I have planned. In that way, I think it'll give some nice closure to Before My Body is Dry. It might be kinda weird to add the next few chapters, the OVA, and then have a whole mess of chapters that take place after a time skip. So, I decided it'd be better to create a whole new section to contain them.

Anyhow, this is it ladies and gentlemen! The final fight with Ragyo! It was one hell of a journey getting to this scene, and by God I can't wait to share it with you all. 225,000+ words, and we've finally gotten to the final episode of the anime (not counting the OVA, that is).

It has been one hell of a ride for me. Never have I ever stuck with something for so long like this, and stuck to it with such passion. I've had such a great time writing this story, and an even better time sharing it with you all.

So, for this chapter, I dedicate it to all of you!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill.

Akio bit his lip, hard enough to draw blood to ensure that he didn't sob out loud. His eyes were filled with unshed tears, threatening to

break forth at the slightest of movements. In this single moment, which seemed to drag on for ages, he forgot about the world around him- even himself. His beating heart was in second place. Even with his blurry vision, his eyes never left that of his parents. All he could think about right now was his parents.

"Akio..."

A hand rested on his shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. He didn't bother to look up to see who it was, or even listen to what they had to say. It was probably Ryuko, but he just couldn't bear to look away.

He watched Hiroshi and Kasumi's eyes, just waiting for them to blink. Begging for them to blink. Praying for them to blink. Something. Anything.

But they didn't, and they wouldn't.

Akio sniffled, his right hand moving towards them. He slowly, and very carefully, closed their eyelids with his fingertips. It was out of respect, but in reality he just couldn't stand to look at them anymore. The sight haunted him to his core.

By now, he could hear the sounds of battle commencing once more, followed by the sounds of shouts and screams. He didn't know who they belonged to, nor did he care. He honestly could care less.

A thousand thoughts raced through his head as his hand rested on the cheek of his mother, and his other took a hold of the hand of his father. Their skin felt so cold beneath his.

A few months ago, he didn't even know these people. He had always thought of them as these assholes that had chosen to give him up, but that hadn't been the case. It wasn't in the slightest. He found that they were such kindhearted people when he finally got over his grudges and gotten to know them. They had loved him unconditionally, even when he didn't return the feelings.

And now, his parents... they were...

Now look. Look what his presence as caused.

Look what he had caused. It was him. It was his presence that caused their deaths. It was his fault. If they had never contacted Aikuro, if they had never looked him up, if they had never come to visit him... none of this would have ever happened. Hell, if he hadn't of existed, the Takahiros would still be living with their five year old daughter. They would be oblivious and happy.

It was... it was his fault.

Akio's lower lip began to tremble, tears silently streaming down his face.

Just what was he going to tell Akiko? She expected the world of him, and he never lived up to those expectations, not in the slightest. He had told her he was going to find their parents and bring the home... why did he tell her that? Why did he have to promise such things? No, why did such promises have to be so difficult to uphold?

Akio buried his head in his hands, sobbing silently into his palms.

She was only five years old. Just a five year old girl. She didn't deserve to have her parents ripped from her like this. She was expecting Akio to bring them back, safe and sound.

How could he even look at her after this? How could he even be in the same room as her when he knew that it was *his* fault that this had happened?

"Awh! How tragic!"

Akio slowly lifted his head, looking to the demon of a girl that was now kneeling down across from him.

Was she really going to do this?

"That's just too bad, really," Nui pouted, her hand moving to poke his mother's pale cheek. "I guess that's just how the cookie crumbles-"

Snap!

Before Nui could lay a finger on his mother, Akio had lashed out, grabbing Nui's chin with one hand and her forehead with the other, using his grip to twist her neck and break it with one movement.

Nui eye's rolled into the back of her head, her body slacking against the arms holding her up. Just when Akio had thought he had actually did it, Nui exploded into a cloud of yarn strings and dust. It had never been her in the first place, but just a clone of her.

Akio growled, finally lifting his head to look at the surroundings around him.

Satsuki and Ryuko were engaged with Ragyo, easily handling her now. Satsuki was fighting with her usual grace and elegance, while Ryuko was fighting with much more ferocity than Akio had ever seen of her. Each of her swings were filled with anger and hatred. She swung with reckless abandonment, each and every one of her attacks intending to do serious damage. Her strikes were so thick with emotion that they might cut through Ragyo by themselves, no scissor blade required.

Akio's gaze shifted to the courtyard below, where everyone else was fighting off a group of clones, with a crowd of One Stars assisting them in their struggle. They were all making great head way, the three Elite Four members able to nearly take on all of the clones themselves. Nui's clones were dangerous, but in the end, they were just clones. They couldn't be better than the genuine article.

Even with everything that had happened, their plan was clear and unchanged. Ryuko and Satsuki would take care of Ragyo, while everyone else dealt with the transmitter. For now, Akio was somewhere in between.

"How rude. You know it's impolite to not let a lady finish?"

Akio turned his eyes to back in front of him, where Nui was watching him with her hands on her hips.

He took a deep breath, exhaling through his nose. It looked like there was nothing for it. As much as it killed him, his time for mourning was short lived.

Here she was, right here in front of him. Something told Akio that this was no clone either. This was going to be the real deal. It only made sense. Akio was the one to harm her precious queen, after all.

Akio rose to his feet.

"Oh?" Nui grinned, her giggly and playful side beginning to resurface once again. "Are we finally going to play again?"

Akio didn't say anything. Instead, he took off his Goku uniform and laid it down of the faces of his parents, covering them. Once all was said and done here, he'd get them out of here and to safety. But first, he was going to avenge them, and it started with her.

Nui tilted her head to the side, intrigued by Akio's actions, but deciding to stay quiet for once.

Removing his gloves, Akio then moved a hand to each of his sleeves, tearing them both off effortlessly. Using the white straps of cloth, he tied them around each of his fists, like a boxer would with boxing tape.

For his final fight here, he wouldn't use his Goku uniform. There would be no Life Fibers, nor would there be any bladed gloves. No knives, no staff, nothing. Nothing but his fists and his instincts.

For this final battle, Akio would use the body his parents had gifted him with.

Akio popped his knuckles, turning his head towards Nui.

With tears still in his eyes, he glared at her, intent to kill written all over his face. Here and now, he was going to end her.

Rolling his shoulder blades, he tested his injuries. They would slow him down, but they weren't bad. Ryuko's hybrid body had been able to heal them all to a certain extent, but mostly the stab wound, which still was quite tender. The broken bones were still a problem, as they were still mending, but if Akio didn't get hit, it shouldn't be a serious one.

"This'll be fun!" Nui squealed, clapping her hands together.

Akio said nothing, his face setting in a grim frown.

Raising a hand, he beckoned her to attack.

Nui's eye twitched, her smile faltering. That had done it.

Planting a foot on the ground, Nui launched herself at Akio, her artificial arms turning into razor sharp blades once more.

Akio's nostrils flared as he raised his fists.

Gamagoori opened his eyes, his breaths coming in short ragged gasps.

The man slowly sat up, his hand gingerly rubbing his abdomen. There was a little blood coming from the wound, but it was nothing serious. The titanium-steel belly band that he had decided to put on at the last second had done its job. Harime's blade had pierced his titanium shield, but it only cut his skin slightly, not enough to be anything serious. Thank God for his relatives handiwork. If not for the metal band, who knows what damage Harime would have caused. He'd probably be dead, if not for it.

Ira winced as his stomach crunched together. Alright, the wound might have been a little more serious than he thought, but it was

nothing that would hinder him. He *did* pass out after all.

Catching his bearings, he glanced around at the battle around him. Matoi and Lady Satsuki were engaged in battle with Ragyo, the two sisters able to nearly overpower her with their combined strength. Ira must have missed a fair bit while he was out, as it appeared that Ragyo was severely injured, and the gravity that was once weighing down on him was all but gone once more. With the Submission field gone, his limbs could move easier, and breathing didn't become so much of a chore. He could actually do something, now.

Ira lifted his head higher, glancing at the rest of the surroundings around him. His eyes widened when he fell onto the next battle.

Takahiro and Harime were currently engaged in an all out brawl, their arms moving nearly quicker than Ira could follow. Even though, it was routine even, as if it were a dance. The two, while vastly different, moved with such surprising coordination. Harime would swing, and Takahiro would dodge. The two would go back and forth until Takahiro would finally strike, delivering a vicious jab to Harime's gut or chin.

Each time Takahiro got a hit in, Harime's expression grew noticeably darker. Her attacks came quicker, and came with more ferocity. It was no secret that Harime was getting flustered with Takahiro getting the upper hand.

Ira's eyes drifted a little further from the two, widening even more.

There, several feet from Takahiro and Harime, were two motionless bodies underneath a black jacket. Ira didn't know who they belonged to, but he recognized jacket as Takahiro's Goku uniform.

Ira closed his eyes, allowing himself a brief moment to pray for those who were lost. Those deaths wouldn't go unpunished. The guilty would get their punishment.

Opening his eyes, Ira rose to his feet. Even with his quick knock out, he wasn't done yet. Ira Gamagoori still had a job to do. The transmitter was still standing, after all. It was his duty to take it down.

No one seemed to notice the giant as he turned and walked towards the edge of the cement platform, looking down at the courtyard below. Jakuzure, Sanageyama, and Inumuta were all engaged in battle with Harime clones. They were taking care of them easily, but with the greater numbers of the clones, the Elite Four members were beginning to tire.

Ira's gaze moved across the courtyard, his brown eyes landing on a familiar tuft of hair.

"Mankanshoku..." Ira muttered, his usual strict expression softening.

Mankanshoku was doing her best to fight off the horde of Harime clones, but she was beginning to falter. Her eyes looked puffy, and her hair disheveled. To be honest, she looked like a mess. Yet, she was still swinging away.

Ira frowned. Without the help of Mikisugi and Tsumugu, he wasn't sure that Mankanshoku would be able to stay standing. He couldn't, and *wouldn't* have that. Not while he was still breathing.

But how could he help? If he just threw himself at the Harime clones, he wouldn't be accomplishing anything. Sure, he'd give the others a chance to breathe, but the main problem would still be there: the transmitter.

Ira looked to the giant tower, his eyes looking it up and down. The red force field still protected it, but it didn't look impenetrable. As of right now, he had the element of surprise. It would be wrong to let it go to waste.

"Don't you worry, Mako," Ira said to himself as he took a few steps back to give himself a running start. "I'm coming!"

Mako wheezed as she swung her spiked bat through another Nui clone. They were endless! With each swing, her arms grew more tired, and her heart grew heavier. Honestly, she didn't know how much longer she could keep up.

Gritting her teeth, she raised her bat, readying herself for another clone.

But she wouldn't give up. Not while Ryuko and the others were fighting. Not when too many lives had already been lost for this cause.

If need be, she would swing and swing, over and over again until they were victorious. Everyone else had sacrificed so much. She couldn't be the only one to not give her blood, sweat, and tears for this. She would do Ryuko and Akio proud. She would do Akio's parents proud. They had been so kind and caring towards her and her family. She'd do them justice by staying strong.

Mako sniffled as she swung her bat down on another clone.

She would do *him* proud. She would show him that she wasn't just another underachiever. Mako would prove to him that she wasn't just any ordinary girl. She could be strong too.

And so, Mako kept on swinging, despite her arms protesting the movement.

But she didn't care. She ignored the cries of protest coming from her limbs. She would keep swinging until there was nothing left.

Mako could hear the sounds of battle happening all around her, but she kept her eyes focused out in front of her. She couldn't allow herself to get caught off guard. Not now.

"Mankanshoku!"

Mako snapped her head to the left, narrowly jumping out of the way as a Nui clone swung through the air where she once had been.

Aikuro came charging onto the scene, the metallic leg of his DTR slapping the clone on the head and destroying it.

Mako nodded her thanks, then ran off to engage another bunch of Nui clones.

Nui giggled as Mako came closer, the laugh echoed by her clones. They were taunting her.

Mako sniffled and closed her eyes, swinging the bat and connecting with the head of the first Nui clone.

Now, she was no fighter. That wasn't to say that she wouldn't fight to her last breath, but this just wasn't what she was cut out to do. As much as she wanted to be, she was no Akio or Ryuko. She could only be Mako, and Mako was no fighter.

"HAHAHA!"

Mako opened her eyes, her heart skipping a beat. It... it couldn't be...

"You just leave the transmitter to me!"

Lifting her head to the sky, tears filled Mako's eyes as she saw Gamagoori fly through the air, his hands reaching out to tear through the shield of the transmitter.

"Ira! You're alive!"

She couldn't help it. She had thought he was dead, but he wasn't!

Her heart continued to thump in her chest, even speeding up now that she saw that Gamagoori was still alive and breathing

Gamagoori collided into the transmitter's shield, his hands ripping into the force field.

"Yes!" Gamagoori called back. "Just to be safe, I was wearing a titanium-steel belly band made at my relatives' metal works! It hurt, but the wound isn't serious!"

"Don't act tough when all you did was pass out!" Nonon yelled back.

"I will atone for my shameful behavior through my actions! Shackle Regalia: Persona Unleashed!"

With the added power of his activated Goku uniform, it was child's play for Gamagoori to tear apart the force field with his super human strength.

"Behold the power of my freed ego! The shackles undone and all pride cast aside! Taste the wrath of Bakukai-Gouteki!"

Gamagoori reeled his head back as he shouted, readying himself for his finishing move.

"AHHH!"

The sisters cried out in unison as they jumped into the air, Ryuko's scissor blade mimicking the movement of the scissor blade that Satsuki now carried.

The two slashed through the chest of their mother, their blades crossing by each other as they cut clean through.

"GUH!"

Ragyo coughed blood as her body was cut in to. With her already weakened state, she was no match for the two sisters. At least, not at this moment.

The sisters landed on the ground behind her, immediately turning around to deliver another strike.

Ryuko especially swung with much more force than Satsuki. With each one of her attacks, her wild fire of emotions would bleed out. Each strike carried the weight of her anger, her hatred, her loathing.

Right now, she wanted nothing more than to put her mother's head up on a spike. Ragyo Kiryuin had committed so many atrocities, each one of them more worse than the last.

She wanted to avenge the deaths of not only Akio's parents, but her father too. Ragyo may have given Ryuko life, and may have been her biological mother, but more than that all she did was take things away. She took away lives, happiness, and now, she was threatening to take away the world they lived in.

Ryuko wouldn't soon forget the look in Akio's eyes. They were filled with so much sadness; so much despair. He had barely responded to her or anyone else when they called out to him. All he could do was look at his deceased parents. It broke her heart to see him like that, and know that nothing, even killing Ragyo would make him feel better.

That mental image fueled her, giving her strength.

"AHH!"

Ryuko and Satsuki swung in unison, their blades cutting through Ragyo's waist and cutting her in two.

But, even with her emotions fueling her each and every move, Ryuko wouldn't lose herself. With the help of her sister and her loved ones, she would bring peace to this world. Nothing could stop her from that.

Blood shot from the freshly made wounds in Ragyo's body, covering the ground in its redness. Even with the dozens of gashes through

Ragyo's body, it still remained intact and standing up right. Shinra-Koketsu must have been responsible for that.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" Ragyo growled, blood pouring from her mouth.

Satsuki flicked her scissor blade, flinging the blood from it.

"Your plan for the Cocoon Sphere Nativity has come undone, too, Ragyo!"

Ragyo frowned, before her lips slowly tugged upwards.

"Is it now?"

Akio tilted his head to the side, dodging the stab from Nui.

Nui growled, immediately sending another slash his way, which Akio dodged by jumping back.

That was how the fight had progressed since the beginning. Nui's strikes were reckless and relentless, while Akio would dodge until he found a safe opening to attack. It was like a battle of fire and water. Nui would attack fast and strong, while Akio's footwork allowed him to flow around the battlefield, giving him openings to attack.

As he fought, Akio's heart hammered loudly in his chest, threatening to break loose. It was a caged beast. With each strike that he landed, the venom in his chest built and built. His vision was beginning to go blurry with rage, while his breath began to come in short gasps.

He wanted to tear her head off.

"You're no *fun* !" Nui shouted, planting her foot on the ground and launching herself back at Akio.

Akio stayed put, not moving to dodge or attack.

Placing her hands together, Nui swung downwards at Akio's head.

Akio waited until the very last second and then stepped to his right, dodging the strike effortlessly.

This was his opponent? Was this really the Nui Harime that had given so much trouble to Ryuko and the Elite Four? She was fighting like an amateur. Either her fighting prowess had declined rapidly, or Akio had just become much better than she had.

Cocking his right arm back, he swung at Nui with all of his strength.

Her incompetence angered him.

His fist connected with Nui's cheek, making her stumble and fall fully to the ground.

"Tch!" Nui sat up, wiping her wrist across her mouth. With hate-filled eyes, she turned to shout at Akio.

"How dare-!"

Except she would get no chance. Akio had closed the distance between the two in a flash.

Sending his foot into the center of her face, Nui went flying into air and across the stone floor.

Nui hit the ground and rolled, slowly coming to a stop several feet away, half of her body dangling over the edge. The hit left her feeling dizzy and disoriented, slightly hindering her ability to stand on her two feet.

But once again, Akio was on her before she could even hope to do anything.

Grabbing her by her pigtails, he threw her a few feet away from the edge and immediately followed after her before she had any chance to recover.

"Oof!"

Nui landed on her back, opening her eyes wide when Akio landed on her waist, effectively straddling her.

Nui swung her arms at him, but Akio proved faster.

With his one hand he pinned Nui's wrists together and slammed them into the stone ground. Nui struggled against his grip, but in the end it proved pointless.

In this position, Akio was hunched over Nui, his one hand pinning her two above her. All the while, his eyes bore holes into hers. If looks could kill, his just might.

"Ngh!" Nui winced and tried to fight him off, but Akio's grip was iron. Quickly giving up, Nui resorted to her last option, breaking out into a seductive smile as she looked up at Akio. "I-I didn't know you liked it so rough, Akio. If you want-"

Akio growled and raised his free hand, bringing it around and punching her across the face.

Nui's head snapped to the side, but before she could straighten her neck Akio's hand clamped down on her throat.

She immediately began to choke, her hands instinctively moving to pry Akio's off of her, except that she couldn't. Akio's other hand was still pinning them to the ground.

Akio's other hand tightened around her thin neck, his fingernails drawing blood as he choked her. There was no way he could kill her with normal methods. Just like Ragyo and Ryuko, the Life Fibers of Nui's body would repair any wound done to her body. If tearing out her own heart wouldn't kill her, what could?

Well, he had an idea. Her body might be able to heal anything, but could it still survive without oxygen?

Nui continued to gag, her waist bucking as she tried to fight him off, her feet kicking the air uselessly in an attempt to stop him.

His hand tightened even further as he closed the short distance between the two, his face only inches from her's now. Akio didn't blink as his eyes searched hers.

"Tell me something."

Nui choked, her face turning redder and redder by the second. Water filled her eyes, but it wasn't the only thing that was present there.

"Are you afraid?"

Nui's eyes widened, the look of fear becoming more prominent.

Akio's hand tightened, a satisfying crunching sound coming from beneath his grip. Seeing Nui Harime, one of the three people who had caused his life to spiral into what it was, beneath him and completely vulnerable like this lit a fire in Akio's heart. Seeing the fear in her eyes, and to feel her rapid heartbeat like this only made his own heart quicken.

This woman had played such a large role in ruining Akio's life.

She had played such a large role in killing his parents.

"Does this remind you of anything?!" Akio shouted, his faced twisting into a snarl. "Is this familiar to you?!"

His thirst for revenge was unbearable now.

Akio barred his teeth, raising Nui's head and slamming into the ground.

"DO YOU NOW KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE?!" Akio screamed, slamming her head into the ground once more for good measure. "WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO HAVE YOUR NECK CRUSHED?!"

Her face began to purple, her hips and legs finally settling against the stone surface as she gave up fighting. Just when her eyes began to roll in to the back of her head, Akio let go.

Nui gasped and coughed violently as air came back into her lungs, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she sucked it down greedily.

Akio smiled. A smile that held no happiness, only perverse pleasure.

After a few seconds to ensure she got enough oxygen, Akio slammed his hand back to her neck and tightened his grip. Then he would let go, and grab back on once again. He would wait a few seconds each time, letting her taste the sweet relief of oxygen on her tongue, only to tear that relief away.

He was toying with her.

"You deserve a worse end than the one I'll give you," Akio growled out, his hand clamping around her once more.

He was enjoying it just a little too much.

Just when Akio was ready to end it, a voice called out to them.

"Nui! Sacrifice your body."

Akio turned his head up to where the voice came from, his eyes landing on Ragyo, who had been watching the two with a smile on her face.

His snarl began to fade. Just what was she talking about?

Using Akio's brief lapse in attention to her advantage, Nui opened her mouth and bit down hard on Akio's hand.

Akio yelped and brought his hand back, unconsciously using his other to grab a hold of his injured one.

With Nui's hands freed, she raised her bladed arms into the air.

Akio's face fell. He fucked up.

But, instead of going towards him, Nui slashed at her own neck.

"What?!"

Her blades cut clean through the area Akio's hand had once been, her head popping off like a cork.

Nui's body beneath him evaporated and turned into fibers, leaving Akio straddling the thin air.

She was... gone?

"Damn it!" Akio growled, punching the solid ground beneath him.
"Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

Nui's head flew through the air, its flight stopping when two Life Fiber strings shot from the Original Life Fiber, grabbing her head and bringing it into the orange vessel.

The minute the Life Fibers absorbed the head, the pile began to glow a bright orange and began to twist upwards, forming a giant tower made of the Original Life Fiber's fibers.

"What the...?"

Akio's anger and hatred was replaced with confusion and dread.

The tower of Life Fibers had twisted into a giant face of Nui.

It made Akio shiver just looking at it. Nui was bad enough as it was, he didn't need her face taking up the entire sky.

The tower of Life Fibers began to teeter forwards, threatening to spill over on him.

"Move!"

An arm wrapped around his chest, dragging him off to the side as the tower fully tipped over, Nui's giant face rushing towards where Akio and the others were standing.

Akio and Ryuko fell to the ground, narrowly avoiding the flood of Life Fibers.

The Life Fibers rushed towards Ragyo, the stream of red strings circling around her before getting sucked in by her wounds.

Akio's eyes widened, his heart dropping into his stomach as he watched the display. The entirety of the Original Life Fiber was going to get absorbed by Ragyo.

"What's going on?" Akio mumbled, his eyes refusing to move away.

"I don't know..."

"Nui, my poor daughter, the life Fibers in your body were too powerful, preventing you from ever donning Life Fibers," Ragyo spoke. "But in the end, you were able to wear them! The ultimate dress that is the Original Life Fiber!"

Ragyo's eerily childish laugh echoed throughout the stadium.

Strings that emanated from the Original Life Fiber hovered in the air throughout the stadium as they awaited their turn to get sucked in by Ragyo. Each strand of fiber was a different color, ranging from every color in the rainbow. If it were a different situation, the scene might be considered beautiful.

"Magnificent! You feel so wonderful on me!" Ragyo cried out in her throes of pleasure, her hands unconsciously rubbing herself.

Ragyo's body became whole again, the injuries she had received from Ryuko and Satsuki already healed by the power of the Original Life Fiber. Even the head wound she had received at the hands of Akio had healed.

The Life Fibers did a lot more than heal, however.

Rows and rows of rockets appeared at Ragyo's feet, lifting her eye into the air.

Akio's eyes widened even further, completely baffled by the sight. The Original Life Fiber could do such a thing? By God, Ragyo was essentially a NASA space shuttle at this point!

The woman began to squeal in ecstasy as the thrusters came to life, their rainbow colored flames kicking up smoke and dust all around.

Slowly but surely, the thrusters pushed Ragyo into the air and towards the sky above. All the while, she cried out in pleasure.

Akio had half a mind to cover his ears as Ragyo continued towards space, but soon, her unnatural squeals died off in the distance.

Rising to his feet, Akio kept his eyes peeled on the sky, watching the smoke trail that Ragyo had left behind.

Just what the hell happened? Did she really just fly into space? It just didn't make any sense, and yet, Akio had watched every moment of it. Just how could they combat *that* ? Fly up after her? That was insane. It wasn't like they had space ships just lying around for them to use. Hell, did *anyone* have such technology that could combat Ragyo?

"Akio."

Akio blinked, turning his head away from the sky and turning to Ryuko.

Ryuko's eyes softened, her hand grabbing on to his lightly.

"We should go talk to the others," She whispered.

Ryuko was right. They had to figure out what to do next. Just thinking about it would do nothing.

Akio nodded, letting out a shaky breath. Now that the anger had left his system, he began to feel incredibly weak and tired. The harsh emotions had fueled him, giving him the energy needed to keep fighting. Without it, his limbs felt like lead.

Even more than that, he felt the sadness and guilt wash over him again. They might have been overlooked during his fight, but they were back in full force now.

His eyes traveled across stone platform, eventually landing on the covered bodies of his parents. He had to carry them out of here. He... he couldn't just leave them there.

Ryuko followed his eyes, her own darkening when they landed on the covered forms of his parents.

"Akio..." She mumbled, her hand tightening around his. "We... we should leave them here for now."

"I am *not* leaving them here," Akio glared at her from the corner of his eye. He'd carry them both out if he had to.

"I'm not saying we should," Ryuko frowned. "It's just, well, we don't really have the proper stuff to move them. I mean... we just... we wouldn't want to..."

Akio closed his eyes and turned his head to the ground. She didn't need to finish for him to understand what she was getting at, and she was right, of course. With their... injuries, it wouldn't be safe for Akio or anyone else to carry them. They wouldn't want to disturb them any more than they had to.

But still...

"I-I can't just..." Akio trailed off, his voice cracking.

"I know, I know," Ryuko murmured, rubbing the back of his hand with her thumb. "They'll be safe there for now, though. Once we've won,

we can come back with stretchers."

Akio rubbed at his eyes with his free hand, nodding softly. That was the best course of action in the end. He wouldn't want to hurt them anymore than he already had by being overzealous in his duties.

"Okay," Akio sniffled. "Let's go, then."

The two began walking to the stairwell that lead to the courtyard below. As they walked, Ryuko snuck glances over at Akio, who was completely oblivious to it all. His eyes were on the horizon, listless as they stared off into the nothingness.

His mind, unsurprisingly, was elsewhere. Now that the fighting was over, all he could think about were the parents he was leaving behind.

"Akio, you know you really don't have to-"

"No, I do," Akio interrupted, his voice firm. "I do have to."

Ryuko frowned, her eyes drawn to the unshed tears in his eyes.

Stopping before they made it fully down the rickety stairwell, Ryuko turned to Akio. That snapped him out of his trance, his feet stopping and his eyes turning to the girl beside him.

Breaking the hold on his hand, Ryuko reached up and gently brushed his cheek with her thumb, stopping a tear before it could fall.

Akio flinched, slightly blindsided by her touch.

"I'm so sorry, Akio," Ryuko whispered, her bright blue eyes staring into his green ones.

"As am I," Senketsu spoke up for the first time. "The fault lies on my shoulders. I'm sorry, Akio. I have failed you."

Akio swallowed the lump in his throat. He slowly reached up to the hand on his cheek, taking Ryuko's in his and pressing it to his cheek, closing his eyes as he felt another batch of tears spring from his eyes.

"Neither of you could ever fail me," Akio whispered.

When the two finally made it down to the courtyard, the entire group was waiting patiently for them.

But, before they addressed Ryuko, Akio noticed each of the pitying gazes that were thrown his way.

Akio closed his eyes and turned away.

"Now that they're here, tell us what you've found, Inumuta," Satsuki spoke.

"Of course," Inumuta nodded and started tapping away at the computer on his wrist. "I've determined Ragyo's objective."

That caught Akio's attention, causing him to turn his head back towards the group.

The broken down projectors from the destroyed transmitter all turned out, projecting their light onto the walls and creating an image of Earth.

"Her destination is the REVOCS communications satellite," Inumuta declared, the image depicting a rocket slowly traveling into space and to a satellite orbiting Earth.

Akio blinked, slightly confused.

"So, Ragyo and Koketsu are trying to hook directly into the satellite and broadcast the Absolute Submission signal around the world?!" Aikuro exclaimed, ridding Akio of his confusion.

So that's what she was going to do. She was going to enact the final part of her plan, and wrap the world into one giant cocoon.

"Yes," Satsuki answered. "But since this is an awakening signal, it can't render our Goku Uniforms powerless. We will be able to counterattack."

Off in the distance, someone shrieked.

"The sky! Look at the sky!"

Akio frowned, turning his head up to the starry sky, his eyes widening in fear at the sight that awaited him.

Hundreds of thousands of small red containers floated into the air, drifting straight into the outer layers of the atmosphere.

It was starting.

Beside him he could hear Ryuko take a deep breath, followed by her slowly exhaling.

"I'll go."

"Huh?" The group collectively gasped, turning to face Ryuko.

Ryuko met each of their surprised looks, her back straight and her fists clenched at her sides. Akio knew that look. It was already decided.

"I'll go," She repeated.

Akio didn't say anything, but he couldn't help but frown. He knew that it was what had to be done. In all honesty, the only one with even a glimmer of a chance at stopping Ragyo was Ryuko. No one else held a candle to Ryuko's strength. Out of all of them, she was the only one that could match Ragyo one on one anymore.

But still...

The thought of it scared him. A small, selfish and stupid part of him didn't want her to go. He didn't want to risk the chance of losing her, too. He loved her too much to not be worried about what could happen, even if he fully believed that Ryuko could beat her. He knew it was a stupid worry, but he just couldn't stop himself.

He just... he pictured what would happen if she failed, and it killed him inside. He didn't want to lose anyone else.

But if she didn't go and win, the entire world would be over as he knew it. Including everyone else. Aikuro, Mako and the Mankanshokus, Satsuki... they'd all perish if Ryuko didn't go and win.

"Ryuko! Let's go on a date of our own!"

Akio blinked, his trance broken when Mako popped up between him and Ryuko, her hands raised to the sky.

"Huh?" Ryuko tilted her head to the side, equally taken back by Mako's outburst.

"Listen! When you get back, let's go on a date of our own! Just us girls!" Mako gushed, doing her normal routine and dancing and parading around as she went on one of her famous rants.

It was nice to know that Mako could still be Mako, at least.

"You're making this a world where girls can eat ice cream and go shopping while wearing a cute dress and cute accessories and can wear whatever clothes they like and get all dolled up without fear! Without fear... without fear..."

When she finally decided to finish, Mako was down on her knees, winded from her little speech.

Ryuko blinked dumbly at her friend for a few seconds, before breaking out in a wide smile.

"You're on."

Akio looked around, realizing that the entire group had circled around the three now.

"It's in your hands now," Satsuki stated. "The survival of the human race--"

"For the sake of girls' fashion!" Mako interrupted with a fist pump.

"Right," Ryuko pounded on her chest. "You can count on me."

Closing her eyes, Ryuko took a deep breath as she began to concentrate for her final battle.

This was it. If Akio wanted to say any kind of farewell or wish of good luck, now would be it.

This could possibly be the last time the two would talk to each other.

He glanced around at the crowd around him, wishing now that there weren't so many people, but it wouldn't be enough of a hindrance for him to squander this small chance.

"Ryuko."

Ryuko flinched, raising her head and opening her eyes.

Her blue eyes immediately fell on to Akio.

"Yes?"

Akio took a deep breath and stepped towards her, placing each of his hands on her shoulders, giving the cloth over them a slight squeeze.

He had so much he wanted to say to her in this final moment, but so little time to say them all. It was amazing how much came to his mind when the time didn't allow it.

He wanted to tell her how he cherished each moment with her, even before the two even became friends.

He wanted to say to her how grateful he was for her, and how grateful he was for giving him a real "teenage" life.

He wanted to thank her for always listening to him when he needed it most. There might have been a few rough periods, but Akio would be eternally grateful for the positive change she had brought to his life, rather she meant to or not.

He wanted to tell her how he wished he could follow her up there, and how much it pained him to have to send her off like this.

He wanted to tell her how much he needed her, now more than ever.

He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, and how much he thought about her.

He wanted to tell her that she was the star he had always been chasing.

"Akio?"

His hands moved up to her cheeks, softly cradling her face in his hands.

Akio's eyes searched hers, his brain finally realizing what he wanted to say.

Closing the distance between the two, he lightly pressed his lips to hers, instantly cherishing the touch of her soft lips against his.

Ryuko was taken back at first, but quickly recovered herself and returned the kiss, closing her eyes and leaning into it.

Akio savored the moment of intimacy, no matter how brief it might be. To be able to feel her this close to him, with his own two hands... It made the pain that plagued his heart lessen ever so slightly.

Pulling his lips away from hers, Akio moved his head to her shoulder and wrapped his arms around her back.

"Promise me that you'll come back to me," Akio whispered into her ear.

Ryuko smiled and returned the hug, burying her face into his shoulder.

"I promise."

If time wasn't a factor, he could have stayed like that for awhile.

But it was, and he couldn't. Neither could she.

Akio nodded and broke away, taking a few steps back.

"Give her hell for me," Akio told her.

"I will," She answered.

Akio turned his head to Senketsu, giving the Kamui a nod of respect.

"Good luck, Senketsu. It has been an honor."

"The feeling is mutual," Senketsu replied. "It's been a pleasure getting to know you, Akio. I wish only the best for you, my friend."

Akio narrowed his eyes at the final part. Why did it sound so... final?

Ryuko inhaled slowly, closing her eyes and tilting her head down, once again concentrating on the sound of her heart beat.

Energy began to pool around her, enveloping her in an orange light. The wind began to pick up, whipping through the courtyard.

Akio gasped, his eyes widening as the energy began to billow upwards, similar to that of a flame. Now this was something he had

never seen before. She was actually beginning to radiate light! It was, well, it was beautiful.

"I'm going to put on all of your Goku uniforms!"

The crowd around her outstretched their arms, their Goku uniforms activating as Ryuko began to absorb their energy.

Akio looked down at his pants and white shirt, noticing that the remnants of his own uniform were beginning to emit star-shaped flashes of light.

Within seconds, the clothing from Akio and everyone else was stripped from them, leaving them all naked. The uniforms were all turned into energy, which was in turn absorbed by Ryuko and Senketsu.

Senketsu's other shoulder piece began to change form, finally revealing his second eye. The rest of Senketsu began to turn a bright red as his fibers re-wrapped around Ryuko, forming another outfit entirely.

"Senketsu-Kisaragi!" The two shouted in unison.

Akio's jaw dropped. It was... incredible.

Senketsu had changed to a red color, matching Ryuko's now orange hair. His shoulder pieces expanded, nearly matching the length of the four orange tails that had formed from the back. The two hair pieces in Ryuko's hair had expanded as well, now at least half a foot long each.

Orange Life Fibers began to form around the two, twisting upwards to make a makeshift rocket, similar to the one that Ragyo had used only moments before.

The thrusters kicked on, sending Ryuko and Senketsu barreling into space, directly after Ragyo and Koketsu.

Akio watched them fly off into the distance, his eyes lingering on the smoke trail as they flew out of view.

Ryuko and Senketsu now held the fate of the world in their hands.

As Akio watched the smoke trail begin to fade away, he felt another emotion fill his chest. It wasn't sadness or anger. It wasn't hatred or self-loathing, either. It was something warmer. Something kinder.

It was hope.

Ryuko gritted her teeth as she flew past the layers of Life Fibers that now covered the Earth's atmosphere. Her destination was just past them, waiting for her.

This was it. Her final battle. It felt so weird to actually think that. Her entire life she had been filled with fighting, either for a just cause, or an unjust one. It felt like yesterday she had set out to find her father's killer, and now here she was, soon to be in a fight to the death with her mother over the sake of humanity.

It was absolutely insane to think about. Just how the hell did she end up here? Only a year ago she was a somewhat regular seventeen year old girl. And now? Well, that also hurt to think about.

Even so, she wouldn't change a single second of it. Well, of course there were some parts she would change, obviously. But she would never, ever give up Senketsu, Akio, Mako, Satsuki, or any of the other friends she had made through her time here.

Ryuko took a deep breath as she and Senketsu cleared the last layer of the Life Fibers. As of now, the two had now cleared the Earth's atmosphere.

She just needed to defeat Ragyo, and then she could be with them all, when they didn't have some big bad goon to fight. She could

actually enjoy their company for a change, instead of having a worry in the back of her mind about what came next.

"Ryuko?"

"Hm?"

"We're almost there."

Ryuko shook her head. Now was no time to be reminiscing or thinking about the future.

"Right," Ryuko nodded, patting Senketsu's eye just as Ragyo and the satellite came into view. "Let's do it, Senketsu!"

"Right!"

Senketsu's thrusters sped up, sending the two barreling directly towards Ragyo.

Ragyo was none the wiser to the two's approach, her attention completely taken up with her satellite. Shinra-Koketsu looked more daunting now, as the cloth of it seemed thicker and harder. Not only that, but what looked to be eyes had sprouted out of Ragyo's shoulders, similar looking to both Junketsu and Senketsu's.

"What?" Ragyo murmured, finally noticing the two's approach when it was already too late.

The two closed the distance between them and Ragyo in a flash, their bodies slamming directly into Ragyo's.

Ragyo grunted in pain and surprise, her body being thrown into space and away from the satellite.

She quickly righted her course, flipping around in mid air to face Ryuko and Senketsu.

"That's far enough, Ragyo!" Ryuko shouted as she came to a stop, the four orange coattails that were spinning around her waist coming to a stop.

Ragyo's surprised look slowly turned to a neutral expression as realization dawned on her as to how Ryuko had followed her up there in the first place.

"Ah, I see. You made a patchwork garment out of all the available Life Fibers to come up here," Ragyo observed. "But still, you are too late.

Ryuko frowned, but otherwise gave no reaction to her mother's words.

"Look at the surface. The signal has reached the Life Fibers all across the world! Humanity's conversion into fabric cannot be stopped!"

Ryuko refused to look down. Not because she was afraid to see Earth covered in layers of red Life Fibers, but because she refused to accept it. When she was done here, they'd all be gone.

"I can't give up that easily!"

Slowly but surely, Ryuko raised her arms into the air, her two scissor blades connecting at the hilt to finally form the one scissor they were always meant to be.

"I have loved ones waiting for me back home! I can't, no, I *won't* lose to you here!"

"You and your nonsense," Ragyo sighed, shaking her head.

Ryuko shifted her grip on her scissor, pointing its tip at Ragyo as the blades expanded.

"Chew on this!"

Ryuko shot forwards, closing the hilt of her scissor and trying to cut through the cloth of Ragyo's Koketsu.

The blades slammed together, but were stopped by the cloth of Shinra-Koketsu. Even if her scissor blade was completed, it still wasn't sharp enough to cut through the cloth of Ragyo's uniform.

Ragyo laughed at Ryuko's failed attempt, more than a little amused by the outcome.

"What's the matter?" Ragyo continued to laugh before calming down. "That scissor blade is also made of hardened Life Fibers. It is powerless before the Absolute Submission, which is the master of all Life Fibers!"

Ryuko gritted her teeth, her expression darkening.

"Still, you must be punished for the sin of turning your blade against this grand cloth-"

White tendrils appeared from the back of Koketsu, each of them pointing directly towards Ryuko.

"-Which is the equal of any god!"

The tendrils shot directly towards Ryuko, each of them sharper than the last.

Ryuko growled and dodged the first one, then used her scissor to block the next three.

But, despite her valiant effort, they proved too much for her.

She wasn't fast enough to dodge or block the rest of the tendrils. Each of them pierced Ryuko's body, punching clean through her flesh and out through the other side.

Ryuko cried in pain as they lifted her into the air, the spikes digging even further into her body.

Without a moment's notice, the tendrils threw her off, sending her hurling towards Earth.

Ryuko's vision blurred as she plunged towards Earth, the wounds caused by Ragyo already healing.

"Ryuko!" Senketsu cried! "Hang in there!"

Ryuko shook her head, ridding her mind of its momentary lapse.

"Yeah, I'm okay!" Ryuko shouted back as she righted herself. "I'm still good to go!"

The two flew back towards Ragyo, Ryuko's determination still burning bright in her chest.

Ragyo laughed at their plight, leveling herself out and flying to meet the two.

The two forces of nature met halfway, Ryuko's scissor blade clashing with Ragyo's Koketsu.

"My poor daughter who was entangled in Soichiro's dying wish," Ragyo spoke as the two exchanged blows as they flew through space. "With all your power, why do you not understand the fundamental principal of the universe?!"

The two were flashes of light as they collided, Ryuko orange and Ragyo purple. They were moving faster than the human eye could track, possibly even faster than the speed of light as they clashed against each other. Their fight was otherworldly.

A duel fit for the Gods.

"Look, Ryuko, at the blue world," Ragyo continued as she went on the offensive, forcing Ryuko to block or evade. Even then, a fair amount of strikes got through and bit into her flesh. "At the shining sun! At the twinkling stars! This is the cosmos. But even this

beautiful vista will one day be destroyed. Creation and destruction. They have been preordained since this galaxy was born."

Ryuko grunted in pain and annoyance, just waiting for Ragyo to shut her trap.

"The Life Fibers work in the same way! They are part of the law of the universe!"

"When are you going to quit monologing?!"

Ryuko dodged Ragyo's next strike, and attacked with one of her own.

Ragyo blocked it easily, Ryuko's scissor blade hovering only inches from her face.

"How can my very own daughter be so dense?!"

"It ain't like I was raised by you!"

"Oh, yes! That was a mistake!"

Two tendrils shot from Koketsu, digging into Ryuko's gut and chest and pulling in opposite directions.

Ryuko was thrown away, her deep wounds already mending as she came to a stop.

If Ryuko had been paying attention, she might have noticed Ragyo wince.

"It'll take more than that to do me in!" Ryuko smirked, but on the inside she was filled with pain.

Ragyo scoffed and shook her head.

"I must be subconsciously pulling my punches," Ragyo noted to herself. "It would appear that I still have a bit of humanity left within

me."

Ryuko's eye twitched, her smirk turning into a snarl.

"... Humanity?" She mumbled. "Humanity?! Where was your humanity when you *killed* his parents! How dare you say such a thing to me!"

Ryuko charged Ragyo, cocking her arms back to deliver a vicious swing at Ragyo's chest.

A tendril shot out and blocked Ryuko's strike, followed by her next one, and the one after that.

"Don't you dare use a word like that!" Ryuko shouted as she swung.

" *I suppose you're right*," Ragyo sneered, showing her fangs.

The hood she was wearing began to mutate, pooling at the sides of her head and expanding outwards to form what looked to be horns.

Ryuko gritted her teeth in preparation as hundreds of tendrils snaked out from behind Ragyo.

"This ends now!"

The tendrils all flew towards Ryuko, impaling her faster than she could hope to block or dodge.

For each spike that dug into her flesh and pulled out, another three took its place.

Ryuko cried out in pain, doing her best to stay conscious during the onslaught.

Distancing herself from Ragyo and her onslaught, Ryuko took a breather as her wounds began to heal completely.

"I'll decide my own ending! I don't take orders from you!"

And just like that, Ryuko charged Ragyo again, sending herself back into the thick of it.

This time, however, she was able to repel each of her attacks

"The strength of your Life Fiber compatibility is a precious thing!" Ragyo laughed as four tendrils snuck through her defenses and impaled her, throwing her to the Life Fiber layers below.

Ryuko hit the makeshift floor and bounced, rolling across the ground for a few seconds before stopping herself with her back foot.

As she rose back to her full height, the last of her injuries had already healed. Even with this strength she had, time was running out. Both for her, and the rest of the world. The small area that was yet to be covered was beginning to close. If she didn't end this soon, the world would be completely covered.

"Ryuko, this is bad," Senketsu spoke. "We're running out of time!"

"I know," Ryuko replied and raised her blade. "This will end it!"

Pushing herself off the ground, Ryuko began sprinting on the Life Fiber layer, her blade raised and ready.

Vaulting into the air, she brought her blade back, letting out a war cry as she flew at her mother.

Ragyo laughed and raised her arm, the cloth turning into a razor sharp blade.

With a single swing Ragyo pierced Ryuko's abdomen, nearly impaling her entire front. Blood began to pour from the wound, more than a regular human would even have in their body to begin with. Blood dribbled down from Ryuko's mouth, slowly moving down her cheek as she tilted her head back.

"What is going to end?" Ragyo squealed in delight. "Your life?!"

Ryuko grinned.

"You're the one who's finished."

Ragyo stopped laughing. "What?"

Grabbing Ragyo's arm, Ryuko lowered her head, pulling herself further up on Ragyo's arm.

"Did you forget? The closer I come to dying, the stronger I bounce back!"

Realization washed over Ragyo, her eyes widening.

"You... deliberately took the brunt of my attack?"

"I gritted my teeth and took it as a dose of tough love from *Mom*," Ryuko spat, the venom clear in her voice.

Black and red streams of energy began to pool in Ryuko's wound from the space around her.

"And I will until Senkestu and I max out our growth!"

Ragyo gasped, her head turning back and forth as she watched the energy get sucked in by Ryuko.

"Perhaps," Ragyo admitted. "But still, Life Fibers cannot injure me!"

Ryuko smirked as the energy she absorbed increased.

"Even if I absorb that Absolute Submission field?"

One of Koketsu's eyes turned to dust as Ryuko's absorption increased in power.

"I-Impossible!"

Ryuko's grip tightened around Ragyo's arm, her glare intensifying. In that moment, it all became clear to her what her dad's true intention was.

"Dad's ultimate weapon wasn't some stupid scissor blade!" Ryuko shouted as she pulled herself closer. "It was me and Senketsu!"

"What?"

"It's the infinite absorption ability he gave us!"

It was all so clear now. That's why she had been able to absorb the Life Fibers from the foes she defeated. It wasn't just for show, or some trophy of their victory, it was meant to nourish her power!

"I am evolving," Senketsu yelled, as he too understood. "I have free will, and I can make myself understood by humans!"

"We're neither human nor clothing!" Ryuko began.

"But at the same time, we are both human and clothing! We are everything!" Senketsu finished.

"People can't become clothing! People are people, and clothing is clothing!"

"What's this nonsensical garbage you're spouting?!" Ragyo screamed, as an unfamiliar emotion clouded her heart.

"Nonsensical is our thing!" Ryuko retorted.

The flood gates finally opened as the streams increased in intensity, enveloping Ryuko in a heavenly light. The rest of Ragyo's Koketsu had been absorbed by Ryuko, leaving the would-be destroyer of humanity naked and useless.

Throwing Ragyo off of her, Ryuko reached out and grasped a hold of the satellite, bringing the makeshift microphone to her mouth.

"People are people, and clothes are clothes!" Ryuko repeated herself, her voice going far and wide across the cosmos.

A great flash of light emitted from Ryuko and the satellite, covering Earth in its rays.

Ragyo could only watch stupefied as her plan began to unravel completely.

"Turn all humans back into humans!"

A cracking sound echoed throughout space as cracks began to form on the cocoon that covered the Earth's surface. The breaks began to spread like wildfire, and soon the entire layer of Life Fibers began to deteriorate as the human hostages were freed from their captivity and sent back down to Earth.

"This can't be happening..." Ragyo mumbled as she watched the very last bit of the layer crumble away. "Everything is returning to nothing?"

The battle was over. Ragyo had lost, and Ryuko had won.

Ryuko let go of the satellite, turning to face her mother one final time. Senketsu had reverted back to his regular state, the energy given to them from the Goku uniforms now depleted. Not that it mattered anymore. Victory was assured.

"That's right, Mother," Ryuko spoke, her voice but a whisper. "The Earth will never be a Cocoon Sphere now. Come back to Earth, and face trial for your crimes against humanity."

And more importantly, her friends. Ryuko would never forget what her mother has done to them.

"Pathetic."

Ragyo stabbed herself through the chest, pulling out her own beating heart and holding it high.

"I will decide how I die."

Ryuko only frowned. Not a single fiber of her being would tell Ragyo to stop. Not after what had happened here today. If she wanted to commit suicide, so be it.

"Ryuko, this is not the end," Ragyo sneered as she held her beating heart in the palm of her hand. "Life Fibers are continuing their advance across the cosmos. More will come to this world! Of that you can be sure."

Ryuko remained neutral. Empty threats from a beaten woman would not scare her.

"Even if they do, people will go on being people. Of that you can be sure."

Ragyo only giggled, her hand closing around her heart and crushing it.

Ragyo's body exploded into thousands of red fibers, the fibers dispersing and spreading throughout the cosmos.

Ryuko watched long after the last fiber disappeared. So that was it. It was done.

Unbeknownst to her, Senketsu was doing much more than just losing a bit of energy.

"Let's go home, Ryuko."

Ryuko blinked, finally turning her head away from the vast nothingness and down towards her sailor uniform.

She finally noticed the bits of his cloth that were beginning to degenerate.

"What's wrong, Senketsu?" Ryuko asked, a seed of worry beginning to grow in her heart.

"Shinra-Koketsu's power appears to be greater than I thought," Senketsu whispered.

Ryuko's eyes widened. "Wait, are you-"

Senketsu moved on his own, flying upwards and then plunging back towards the Earth's atmosphere.

"Hurry! There's not much time!"

"Not much time? What do you mean?!"

Senketsu didn't answer. He could only make sure that Ryuko got home safely.

As the two plummeted towards the Earth, the heat from reentry began to increase, so much so that flames were beginning to break out around them. If they kept going like this, neither of them would make it back alive. Something had to be done.

Senketsu slithered off of Ryuko's body, placing himself in front of her head to protect her from the heat of atmospheric entry.

He did not let any cries of pain or anguish escape him as the flames licked at his body. He couldn't, and he wouldn't.

"S-Senketsu!" Ryuko stammered as tears came to her eyes, the worry now almost too much to bear. "Don't do anything crazy!"

To that, Senketsu could only chuckle.

"Coming from you, who has done nothing but?" Senketsu stated calmly, his eyes meeting hers. To him, there was no reason to be afraid. He knew exactly how his story ended.

And as long as Ryuko was safe, it would be worth it. It would all be worth it.

Ryuko gasped, her eyes widening in fear. The severity of the situation was made clear to her as Senketsu's cloth body began to catch fire.

"Senketsu!"

"Even so, this is fine," Senketsu spoke plainly as the fires began to engulf him. To him, it really was fine.

As long as she was safe... As long as she was safe, nothing else mattered. Senketsu would protect her till his dying breath.

"I am sure your father is satisfied," Senketsu continued, undisturbed by the fires now eating at him.

His voice cracked as he continued.

"I had a wonderful time meeting you."

For someone like Senketsu, Ryuko had given him the greatest gift he could ever ask for.

"Idiot! S-stop sounding like you're wrapping things up!"

Senketsu tried to move his sleeve to wipe away her tears one final time, but it was already gone, eaten by the fire.

His words would have to do.

"Don't cry, Ryuko. The time comes when a girl outgrows her sailor uniform. From now on, wear whatever you want. Clothing that is cuter than I."

Senketsu smiled at the thought of it. Ryuko all dressed up and having fun. At the thought of his best friend enjoying the rest of her life, happy and carefree.

Even this, his own death, would be worth it if that wish came true.

Ryuko began to cry fully, tears streaming down her face as she stared into Senketsu's eyes one final time.

"You got it... I'll do that... I-I'll even wear clothes that'll make you jealous!" Ryuko cried. "Skirts, dresses, you name it!"

Senketsu closed his eyes, his heart finally at peace.

"Good. I'm... glad."

With his final words, Senketsu turned to ash.

Ryuko watched in horror as Senketsu's ashes dispersed in the air, disappearing as quickly as they had appeared.

Senketsu was gone.

"SENKETSU!"

Ryuko continued to plummet towards the Earth's surface, her arms outstretched in the slim hope she might be able to feel her sailor uniform one final time.

Akio's eyes had never left the sky since Ryuko's departure. He had kept on watching, waiting for a sign that Ryuko was returning. Anything.

And he wasn't the only one.

Satsuki stood beside him, her eyes trained on the horizon as she waited to see her sister's return.

Of course, there was the slim chance that Ryuko had perished in the conflict, but neither one of them would mention that. Never would they mention that.

They would keep on watching. They wouldn't believe in any other outcome than her safe return.

Akio's eyes widened.

Without a second thought, he began barreling towards the opposite side of the stadium.

Satsuki's eyes widened too when she caught sight of what Akio had saw.

There, like a shooting star flying through the sky, was Ryuko, her body motionless as she fell back down to the Earth.

"RYUKO!" Satsuki screamed as she began to run after Akio.

Ryuko wasn't moving. Her body was completely still as it fell.

"SNAP OUT OF IT RYUKO!" Satsuki screamed once more as she caught up to Akio. She wouldn't dare to believe that Ryuko might have perished.

"Damn it," Akio grunted, pushing more energy into his legs as he turned his head up towards the sky. "RYUKO, WAKE UP!"

His body was tired, but it was beaten.

He *would* reach her.

Akio and Satsuki locked hands as they ran and raised their joined arms. The two knew what they had to do.

"RYUKOOOO!" The two shouted as she came plummeting towards them.

Ryuko slammed into their conjoined arms, the force of it sending them skidding backwards on their feet.

Both of them wrapped their other arms around her protectively as their feet dug into the ground.

"Ryuko!"

Mako came running up behind them, throwing her body into the three to stop their skid.

Even with their combined efforts, the force of Ryuko's impact was too much.

"Matoi!"

The Elite Four came next. Nonon first, then Inumuta, then Uzu, followed by Gamagoori at the rear.

Even then, it wasn't enough.

"Ryuko!"

The Mankanshokus came next, followed by Aikuro and Tsumugu, and then finished off by everyone else.

The crowd slammed into the destroyed tower, the tower itself crumbling at the impact.

They hit it hard, but not enough to cause any real damage to themselves. With the combined efforts of everyone, they had been able to stop Ryuko's descent.

They had done it.

Akio panted, a smile growing on his face as he looked down at the girl in his arms.

"You kept your promise."

Ryuko smiled weakly up at him.

"Of course I did."

It was over. It was finally over. The battle that Akio had been fighting for years was finally finished. From here on out, they wouldn't have to worry about the future. The worry that had always been gnawing

at his brain would finally be gone. No longer would there be any fear that tomorrow might never come. No longer would there be any fear as to what the next day might hold.

Their victory didn't come without sacrifices. The wounds that had been inflicted might take months, even years to heal. Their hearts would always carry the scars given to them over the course of this seemingly never ending battle.

Those who were lost today would never be forgotten. They would live on in the hearts of those that loved them. They would carry them within their hearts, where ever they went, always and forever. In that way, they could be immortal.

In the end, they would honor them by living on.

By continuing the life that Senketsu had always wanted to protect.

By continuing the life that Hiroshi and Kasumi Takahiro had created.

In that way, they could live for them.

Akio and Ryuko might not realize that now, but as time passed by, they would. With the love that Ryuko, Akio, and everyone else shared with each other, the wounds would lessen to some degree, but they would never be forgotten.

With one hand running through Ryuko's hair, and his other hand still connected to Satsuki's, Akio turned his head up to the sky.

The sun was beginning to rise as a new day began, but the stars of the night sky could still be seen.

In fact, they had never been brighter.

A battle has been fought, and is now over.

Place your sword upon the ground, and rest in the temporal peace.

After dozing in the warmth of a dream, a new day will begin.

The days keep passing by...

And we still chase the same star we once saw.

The End.

And there you have it.

Credit goes out to the great visual novel/anime Fate/Stay Night for the excellent poem that I borrowed at the end. I found it rather fitting for the ending to this chapter. I love this little tidbit of writing, and I couldn't help but use it as a little send off. So, remember that! It comes from Fate/Stay Night! It is not mine!

It was quite the emotional roller coaster to write this chapter, I'll tell you that much.

A big thank you to everyone that helped me brainstorm, come up with ideas, and those who shared your ideas with me!

Well everyone, that's that! I don't have much to say that hasn't been said already, so stay tuned for the next installment in the story of Akio Takahiro and Ryuko Matoi!

Until next time!